

# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

*Interpretations on the  
One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary  
of his Birth*

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# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

*12 February 1809—15 April 1865*

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One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary  
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# He Belongs to the Ages

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN by PAUL M. ANGLE

**"Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us do our duty as we understand it."**

*From Lincoln's Cooper Institute Speech, February 27, 1860*

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EUROPE dominated the world; Napoleon dominated Europe.

The French Emperor had forced the Tsar of Russia and the King of Prussia to conclude humiliating alliances with him. His armies swarmed through Spain and Portugal, reducing the last opposition to his rule on the Continent. Only England continued to defy him, but while the island nation still ruled the seas, its chances of a decisive victory seemed slim.

The year was 1809, the month, February.

The war in Europe had had a disastrous effect upon the maritime trade of the United States, but the young nation had refused to become involved in the fighting. The third American President, Thomas Jefferson, neared the end of his second four-year term and would soon turn over his office to James Madison.

The thirteen original states of the Union had grown in number to seventeen. Most of the country's 7,000,000 inhabitants still lived along the Atlantic coast though each year thousands moved westward, taking up the fertile land that lay beyond the Allegheny

Mountains. In this region three new states had already been formed; more would follow soon.

The oldest of the new states was Kentucky, lying south of the Ohio River and extending to the Mississippi. It was a rich land, long prized by the Indians because of the abundance of game to be found on wooded hillsides and in grassy valleys. To the American pioneers it was a paradise. Four hundred thousand men, women and children lived within its boundaries in 1809, yet the state was thinly peopled. There were few towns of any size. Most of the settlers lived in cabins—rough log houses which they had built for themselves. On small fields dotted with stumps they grew corn (maize) for themselves and their livestock—usually a horse, a cow, and a few pigs. They dressed partly in skins from the game that was still plentiful in the woods and partly in clothes made by the women from wool which they themselves spun and wove. They had little money, but needed little. They lived in snug houses, and had plenty to eat. They owned their land, governed themselves, and took pride in their independence.

On such a farm, in the north-central part of the state, Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809. His father, Thomas Lincoln, had been brought to Kentucky as a four-year-old-boy. There he had grown to maturity and had married young Nancy Hanks. They already had one child, a daughter named Sarah. After Abraham they would have one other son, a boy who died in infancy.

Both parents had grown up without schooling, though the father could sign his name. Their children, they decided, should have the opportunities that they themselves had been denied. When wandering teachers organized schools Sarah and Abraham attended them. But the schools rarely lasted long. To attend cost money, and of this commodity the Lincolns, like their neighbors, had little.

When Abraham was seven years old the family moved from Kentucky to southwestern Indiana, across the Ohio River. Thomas Lincoln had had trouble with the title to his farm. Besides, he had decided that he preferred to live on free soil where slavery was illegal. There was not a large number of Negroes in Kentucky, but they could be held in slavery. In Indiana they could not.

The new home, however, was in a region much newer and wilder than that which they had left. Squirrels, raccoons, even bears, abounded in the thick woods where they had chosen to live. Trees had to be cut down for a cabin, and to provide space where a patch of corn could be planted. There were few neighbors to help, so the children had to bear as large a share of the work as they could. Life was harder than it had been in Kentucky.

Soon sorrow was added to hardship. Illness swept the neighborhood, and many settlers died. Among them was Nancy Lin-

coln. Without her the cabin became a cheerless place. Often the children were poorly clothed and poorly fed, but somehow they managed until their father married again. Their new mother, Sarah Bush Johnston, was a widow with children of her own and enough furniture to brighten the cabin and make it comfortable. She was kind and helpful to the Lincoln children, and they repaid her with respect and affection.

Neither child had much time for play. As a boy, Abraham husked corn after it had ripened, fed and milked the cow, brought in wood for the fireplace, and carried water from a nearby spring. As he grew older he worked principally with an axe, clearing ground for planting, splitting rails for fences, chopping wood for fuel. He became very strong. All his life he could grasp an axe at the end of its handle and hold it at arm's length—a feat which only a powerful man can perform.

Abraham was sent to school in Indiana as in Kentucky, though not often and only for short periods. Altogether, his schooling amounted to no more than a year. Yet in that time he learned to add, subtract, multiply and divide, and to read. In this last skill he improved himself, soon progressing from Aesop's "Fables" and "Robinson Crusoe" to a biography of George Washington, a history of the United States, and the Bible, and the laws of Indiana—all the books he could find in the sparse pioneer homes. Studying by himself, he made up for much of the formal education he had missed.

Until Lincoln was nineteen years old he knew nothing of the world beyond the immediate region in which he lived. But in the spring of 1828 he was employed to help another young man take a flatboat—a home-made barge—to the distant city of New Orleans where farm produce could be sold to advantage. Day after day, as the flatboat



floated down the broad Ohio and the broader Mississippi, the two-man crew saw new sights: luxurious river steamers, towns and cities larger than they had ever dreamed of. And at New Orleans, the gay, sophisticated metropolis of the South, Lincoln for the first time saw slaves in large numbers.

Two years later Thomas Lincoln decided to move again, this time to the state of Illinois, directly west of Indiana. He had heard that there the soil was deep, black, and treeless, and that it would yield enormous crops with little work. In the early spring of 1830 the family loaded all its furniture and tools in wagons, and with the son driving one of the slow-moving ox-teams, started for the new home. Two weeks later the caravan stopped on the bank of the Sangamon River, in the central part of the State ten miles west of the present city of Decatur. There, once more, the men built a cabin, split rails for fences, and planted corn.

By this time Lincoln was twenty-one years of age, a grown man, and free to do as he chose. He remained with his parents a year, helping to establish them in their new home, then struck out to make his own life. After a second trip with a flatboat to New Orleans he decided to settle at New Salem, an Illinois village on the Sangamon River where fifteen or twenty families lived in log cabins. He supported himself by clerking in a general store and working in a grist mill operated by the store owner.

The people of New Salem liked the young newcomer. He was friendly, frank, and honest, and there was something appealing about his homeliness and his awkward height—he was six feet four inches tall. He had wit, and he could tell droll stories inimitably. The villagers, like all American frontiersmen, put a high value on physical strength. When Lincoln threw the neighbor-

hood champion in a wrestling match, they accepted the new arrival as the leading man of the community. A few months later, when war with the Indian chief Black Hawk broke out in the northern part of the state, the local militia company elected Lincoln captain. The campaign over, he ran for election to the state legislature. In this, his first attempt to win public office, he failed, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that almost all the people of New Salem voted for him regardless of their party ties.

But Lincoln soon had to face the hard fact that popularity alone does not buy clothing and food. Even before the Indian war, the store in which he worked had failed. He decided to become a storekeeper on his own account, and with another man bought a stock of goods on credit. This venture, too, soon failed, leaving Lincoln with a debt which he was years in discharging. Then good luck and good reputation came to his aid: he was appointed postmaster. The office paid little, but when supplemented by odd jobs, it afforded him a living.

About this time Lincoln was offered a position as deputy county surveyor. Many settlers were purchasing land for farms and town sites, and the services of surveyors, capable of establishing exact boundaries, were in demand. Lincoln knew nothing of the art of surveying, but the fees would be an important addition to his income, and he decided he could learn. He procured a book on the subject, and with the aid of the village schoolteacher, mastered it.

Before this time, Lincoln had realized that unless he could improve his imperfect education he might drift from job to job all his life. He took stock of himself, and came to the conclusion that above all else, he must learn to speak and write with clarity. That meant that he must learn grammar, the structure of language. He found a textbook and studied

by himself and with the schoolmaster until he had accomplished his purpose.

Lincoln was encouraged by his success in mastering grammar and surveying. When he first settled at New Salem he had thought of the law as a profession, but had concluded that he was too poorly prepared. Now he reconsidered. Encouraged by John T. Stuart, a lawyer who had served with him in the Black Hawk War, Lincoln began to study. Often he walked the twenty miles to Springfield, where Stuart lived, to borrow books. There were few schools of law at this time, and most lawyers prepared for their profession as Lincoln did—by reading the basic books. Twenty years later he advised a young man: “If you are resolutely determined to make a lawyer of yourself, the thing is more than half-done already. It is but a small matter whether you read *with* anybody or not. I did not read with anyone. Get the books, and read and study them till you understand them in their principal features. . . . Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing.”

In 1834, two years after his first attempt, Lincoln ran again for election to the state legislature, this time successfully. In the late fall he put away his law books and took the stage coach for Vandalia, then the state capital. For the next ten weeks he mixed with the leading men of Illinois, learned the give-and-take of debate, became familiar with the process of law-making. At the end of the session he returned to New Salem far wiser in the ways of the world than he had been a few weeks earlier.

Lincoln was re-elected in 1836. His popularity and ability made him the leader of the Whig party in the legislature. The Whigs were in the minority, yet Lincoln was able to win a legislative victory: the removal of the state capital to Springfield. The session

also gave him an opportunity to go on record as far as slavery was concerned. When the legislature passed a resolution declaring “the right of property in slaves is sacred to the slave-holding States by the Federal Constitution, and that they cannot be deprived of that right without their consent,” Lincoln and one other member filed a dissent. While agreeing in general with the resolution, the two dissenters insisted on recording their belief that the institution of slavery was “founded on both injustice and bad policy.”

Soon after the session ended Lincoln, now a member of the bar, removed from New Salem to Springfield. New Salem was losing its small population, but Springfield, the new capital, would grow and offer many opportunities for a lawyer. His friend Stuart took him into partnership.

Thus, at the age of twenty-eight, Lincoln entered a new calling in a new location. At the same time, he faced an important personal decision. Should he propose marriage to Miss Mary Owens, a young woman from Kentucky with whom he had fancied himself in love for a year or so? He proposed, and was rejected. He turned to Miss Mary Todd, also from Kentucky, who was enjoying an extended visit in Springfield. Sometime in 1840 they became engaged. After a few months the engagement was broken—the reasons are still obscure—but in 1842 they mended their disagreement, and on the fourth of November of that year they were married in the home of an Episcopal clergyman. A week later the bridegroom wrote to a fellow-lawyer: “Nothing new here, except my marrying, which to me, is matter of profound wonder.”

Worry over the uneven course of his courtship brought into the open a trait of Lincoln’s which his friends would remark for the remainder of his life. In one letter to

Stuart, then in Washington as a member of Congress, Lincoln wrote: "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth." Such moods passed, often turning suddenly into a state of high spirits in which Lincoln, the practised story-teller, would keep a group of men in laughter for hours. Nevertheless, periods of depression seized him often enough to cause one who knew him well to write: "Melancholy dripped from him as he walked."

Despite his personal difficulties, Lincoln made steady progress in his profession. In the State legislature he served two additional terms—four in all—before he set himself a higher ambition: election to the Congress of the United States. In 1843 and 1844 the nomination eluded him, but in 1846 the Whig Party chose him as its candidate. He was elected, and took his seat late in the following year.

In his single term, Lincoln failed to distinguish himself. He attacked President Polk and the Democrats generally for having brought on the war with Mexico (then nearing its end), although he took pains to vote for supplies for the troops in the field. This was the accepted position of his party, but his stand made him unpopular with his constituents, most of whom favored the war. He gave notice that he would bring in a bill ending slavery in the District of Columbia (where the National Capital is located), provided that the residents of the District consented, but he never carried out his intention. Perhaps his fellow members of the House of Representatives remembered him best for a hilarious speech he made against General Lewis Cass, whom the Democrats proposed to run against Zachary Taylor, a Whig, in the presidential election of 1848. Although Lincoln had gone to Congress

with the intention of serving one term only, he would have been happy had the people of his district urged him to stand for re-election. His position on the Mexican War, however, destroyed any chances he might otherwise have had. Having enjoyed life in Washington, he sought an appointive office. Embittered when the office was given to another, he returned to Springfield determined to have nothing more to do with politics and to throw himself without reserve into the practice of the law.

Lincoln's partnership with Stuart ended after four years. He then became the partner of Stephen T. Logan, an older lawyer of great ability. Under Logan's guidance, Lincoln progressed steadily. In 1845 he decided to establish his own firm—heretofore he had been a junior partner—and took in as his associate the brilliant William H. Herndon. This partnership would last until Lincoln's election to the presidency.

After 1849, when Lincoln returned from Congress, the practice of law in Illinois became increasingly complex. Corporations—particularly railroads—were growing rapidly; they needed lawyers with first-rate training and supple minds. In increasing numbers young men were attending colleges and law schools, and Lincoln saw that he would have to study hard or slip back in the competition. He had a further spur in family responsibilities, for he was now the father of two sons. (Two more would be born soon: one in 1850, another in 1853.)

He applied himself so well that in a few years he was recognized as one of the leading members of the Illinois bar. He appeared frequently in the state Supreme Court and in the Federal courts, where he represented important clients in suits involving large sums of money. At the same time he continued to "follow the circuit"—the old English practice of attending county courts

as they were held in succession. At this time, urged as always by a passion for logical thought and expression, he undertook the study of the Greek mathematician Euclid and succeeded well enough to be able to say that he had "nearly mastered" the six books. In his carpet bag, with Euclid, he carried a worn volume of Shakespeare's plays, some of which—King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Richard the Third—he read over and over again.

Lincoln loved life on the circuit, although it kept him away from home for six months in every year, and yielded only a small return in fees. He was in his element when surrounded by other lawyers in small-town inns, and the long rides across the prairies gave him time for the contemplation that was more precious to him than reading. He never worked out a systematic philosophy, but he came to conclusions which he expressed in speeches, letters, and memoranda.

Thinking of his own life, he wrote that "a capacity, and taste, for reading, gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others. It is the key, or one of the keys, to the already solved problems. And not only so. It gives a relish, and facility, for successfully pursuing the yet unsolved ones. . . . The thought recurs that education—cultivated thought—can best be combined with agricultural labor, or any labor, on the principle of *thorough* work—that careless, half-performed, slovenly work, makes no place for such combination. . . . Ere long the most valuable of all arts, will be the art of deriving a comfortable subsistence from the smallest area of soil. No community whose every member possesses this art, can ever be the victim of oppression in any of its forms. Such community will be alike independent of crowned-kings, money-kings, and land-kings."

He drew on his own experience for a definition of the relationship between capital

and labor. "What is the true condition of the laborer? I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with anybody else. When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor, for his whole life. I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat—just what might happen to any poor man's son! I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he *can* better his condition—when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him!"

Ever since he was a boy he had thought repeatedly of the struggle for American independence. "I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army," he said. "I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the motherland; but something in that Declaration [of Independence] giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance."

The growth of racial and religious intolerance, manifesting itself in the anti-foreign, anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party

of the 1850's, disturbed Lincoln. "How can anyone," he asked, "who abhors the oppression of Negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people?"

Had it not been for a sudden turn in the national policy toward slavery, Lincoln might have followed this pattern of law and learning and reflection for the remainder of his life.

Slavery had existed in the English colonies since 1619. The American Constitution, adopted in 1789, recognized the presence of the institution and placed it within the exclusive jurisdiction of the states rather than the federal government. At that time slaves were held in twelve of the thirteen states, although they were relatively few in the North. Statesmen, South as well as North, regretted the existence of human bondage, and the institution might well have died a natural death had it not been for the invention of the cotton gin. This device, by which the seeds were separated from the cotton fibre quickly and efficiently stimulated cotton growing enormously. Negro field hands came to be in great demand. Planters in the cotton states—all in the South—became defenders of slavery instead of apologists for it. At the same time the Northern states, where slavery was economically unsound, abolished it and became increasingly conscious of what they termed the iniquity of the institution. Thus a sharp division, not only of economic interest but also of moral sentiment, developed between the two sections of the country.

Twice—in 1820 and in 1850—bitter sectional disagreements over slavery brought the United States to the verge of civil war. Both times compromises were devised. An essential feature of the compromises was an agreement by which slavery could be prohibited in the national territories—land owned by the federal government out of

which states would eventually be formed—in much of what is now the western part of the United States.

But in 1854, an ambitious politician, Stephen A. Douglas, Senator from Lincoln's own state of Illinois, introduced a bill—the Kansas-Nebraska Act—which nullified this feature of the compromises. By the provisions of the bill, which became law, the people of the territories, before statehood, could decide whether or not they wanted slavery. Thus a large section of the country, previously closed to slavery, was opened to at least the possibility of its introduction.

Lincoln, like many thousands in the North, was shocked by what he considered a dangerous and immoral departure from long-established policy. Although opposed to slavery in principle, he was not an extremist. He would not, like the Abolitionists, abolish slavery at any cost. He was willing that it should remain untouched in the states where it existed, and would base his hope for its ultimate extinction on economic developments and the conscience of his countrymen. But he would not countenance any measure which, like the Kansas-Nebraska Act, looked toward its extension, into what had been thought to be free soil.

Aroused as never before—this is his own statement—Lincoln threw himself into politics. In 1854 a congressional campaign was in full swing. He began making speeches on behalf of the local Whig candidate who, as a member of Congress, had opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lincoln's speeches suddenly exhibited a depth and power and moral fervor that had been lacking in his earlier efforts.

"Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust," he said in speeches near the end of the campaign. "Let us re-purify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit,

if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of 'moral right', back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of 'necessity'. Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let North and South—let all Americans—let all lovers of liberty everywhere—join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations."

When Lincoln spoke in this vein, he moved thousands.

He also won himself a position of leadership in a new party, the Republican Party, that was taking shape in opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska policy. In 1855 he narrowly missed election to the United States Senate. The following year—the first in which the new party nominated a national ticket—he campaigned unceasingly. He saw the Republican candidates for the presidency and vice-presidency go down to defeat, but he was heartened by the fact that the party swept its Illinois state candidates into office.

Two years later, in 1858, Lincoln had the first great opportunity of his career. Senator Douglas would come up for re-election, and Lincoln was the almost unanimous choice of the Republicans of Illinois to oppose the Democratic Party leader.

The two men had been political rivals since young manhood. While Lincoln was gaining experience in the Illinois legislature, Douglas was ascending the Democratic political ladder, rising from his original position as a state's attorney to a seat in the

national House of Representatives. In 1847, when Lincoln entered the same body, Douglas began his first term in the Senate. By 1858, at the expiration of his second term, he had become an acknowledged party leader and a prominent contender for the presidency.

The campaign lasted nearly four months. Its most notable feature was a series of seven joint debates in which the candidates spoke from the same platform and divided a three-hour period between them. But each man spoke almost every day to audiences of his own. Each traveled thousands of miles, sometimes on river steamers, sometimes on the primitive railroads of the time, more often by stage coach or horse and buggy. Travel alone called for great physical endurance, but neither candidate missed a meeting.

Throughout the campaign Lincoln charged Douglas with having needlessly reopened the slavery question and having prepared the way for the expansion of an evil institution. He also maintained that Douglas's principle of "popular sovereignty"—the right of settlers in the territories to admit or bar slavery as they chose—would not work in practice. Douglas, on the other hand, declared that Lincoln was promoting a war between the North and South, and advocating Negro equality. While Lincoln did not believe that the Negro was ready for full political and social rights, he hoped that slavery would eventually be abolished and that the Negro would have every opportunity to better himself. Douglas cared nothing for Negro rights, and proclaimed repeatedly that he was willing to have white supremacy continue indefinitely.

Although Douglas was returned to the Senate, in the long run, the victory was Lincoln's. The seven formal debates, reported in newspapers all over the country,



made him a national figure. Had it not been for the reputation he acquired in this contest, he would not have been considered for the presidency two years later.

As it was, Lincoln was not a prominent contender when the Republican National Convention met in the spring of 1860 to nominate its candidates. But as the convention progressed it became apparent that the leaders—Senator William H. Seward of New York and Governor Salmon P. Chase of Ohio—had made so many enemies during their long political careers that they could not be nominated. The delegates turned to Lincoln, an “available” candidate. On the third ballot he was nominated.

Events in the summer of 1860 assured his election. The Democratic party broke into two factions, one nominating Douglas, the other choosing a pro-Southern extremist. A fourth party—the Constitutional Union—divided the opposition still further. Lincoln made no personal campaign, but received more votes than any of his three opponents and became President.

Southern states had threatened to leave the Union if a Republican were elected President. Many Southern leaders believed that their section would be discriminated against by an administration composed of enemies of slavery. Southern theorists had long contended that any state had a right to withdraw from the Union peacefully whenever it was to its interest to do so. They now proceeded to put theory into practice. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina, through an ordinance of secession, declared herself an independent state. By March 4, 1861, when Lincoln took the presidential oath of office, six other states all in the deep South, had followed South Carolina’s lead. More than that: they had organized a government of their own, the Confederate States of America.

So far, the seceding states had not been challenged by force. They had taken over nearly all the federal forts, arsenals, post offices, and customs houses within their limits, and hoped to make an amicable settlement of the property rights involved. But neither Lincoln nor the North generally would admit the right of secession, and the President’s oath of office required him to “preserve, protect, and defend” the Union. Still, he abstained from hasty action, hoping that time, good sense, and persuasion would induce the Southern states to return to their old allegiance. In his first inaugural address—one of his truly great state papers—he tried to assure the people of the South that they had nothing to fear from a government in Republican hands, argued that secession would lead to anarchy, and urged that time be given a chance to heal the division that had taken place.

“Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people?” he asked. “Is there any better, or equal hope, in the world? In our present differences, is either party without faith of being in the right? If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth, and that justice, will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people. . . .

“My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and *well*, upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there be an object to *hurry* any of you, in hot haste, to a step which you would never take *deliberately*, that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it. Such of you as are now dissatisfied, still have the old Constitution unimpaired, and, on the sensitive point, the laws of your own framing under it; while the new administration will have no immediate

power, if it would, to change either. If it were admitted that you who are dissatisfied, hold the right side in the dispute, there still is no single good reason for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust, in the best way, all our present difficulty.”

The President dropped argument and closed with an appeal to a people who had shared a national experience for many years.

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

For a month the situation remained the same, except that Southern Senators and Representatives resigned their seats and Southern officers of the Army and Navy gave up their commissions to enter the armed forces of their states or the Confederacy. Then came the necessity for a decision. Fort Sumter, in the harbor at Charleston, South Carolina, was one of the few forts in the South that remained in Union hands. Its food supplies were running low. Lincoln would not give it up to the South, nor would he risk war by sending reinforcements. He chose the middle course of sending provisions only, and notified the government of South Carolina that there would be no attempt to use force unless the provisioning expedition were resisted. The Confederate authorities replied by opening fire on the fort, which surrendered on April 13, 1861, the day after the bombardment began. Two days later the President proclaimed a state of insurrec-

tion and called out the armed forces of the Union. The Civil War had begun.

The fifty-two-year-old Lincoln, faced with the gravest crisis in the nation's history, could hardly be said to be prepared for his responsibilities. His legislative experience had been limited; he had had no training in statecraft; he was untested as an administrator. To complicate matters, he had to decide upon thousands of appointments, aided only by a small untrained staff. The government itself lacked an organization to cope with the problem of raising, organizing, and equipping an army and navy of the size that would be needed.

Yet Lincoln had a great asset. He believed with the fervor of a religious conviction that the cause of the Union was not only righteous but also of supreme importance to all mankind. At every opportunity he stressed this belief, certain that if the people of the North could be brought to share his own conviction, they would put forth the effort that would result in victory. In his first message to Congress (July 4, 1861) he said:

“This issue embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man, the question, whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes. It presents the question, whether discontented individuals, too few in numbers to control administration, according to organic law, in any case, can always, upon the pretences made in this case, or on any other pretences, or arbitrarily, without any pretence, break up their government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth. It forces us to ask: ‘Is there, in all republics, this inherent, and fatal weakness?’ ‘Must a government, of necessity, be too *strong* for the liberties of its



own people, or too *weak* to maintain its own existence?" "

Lincoln soon needed all his faith. For the North, the war went badly. In the first great battle—at Bull Run, Virginia, on July 21, 1861—a supremely confident Union army suffered a disastrous defeat and retreated in confusion to Washington. New commanders fared no better; other reverses followed. Still, the war was not entirely one-sided. In the West, Confederate forces in Tennessee were overcome, though at heavy cost.

In the lower Mississippi Valley, the Federal Navy forced the approaches to New Orleans and took the city, which would remain permanently in the possession of the Union forces.

But the war could not be won in the West alone. In the East the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by one of the military geniuses of the war, Robert E. Lee, must be destroyed. Reluctantly the President, still not sure of himself in the sphere of the military, made his choice: he would restore General George B. McClellan to the command of the Union Army of the Potomac, even though the General, in an unsuccessful campaign against Richmond, had come dangerously close to insubordination. McClellan justified Lincoln's confidence by stopping Lee's invasion of the North at Antietam, Maryland.

The Battle of Antietam had more than military significance. It signaled a fundamental change in Lincoln's policy. In the beginning he had aimed at only one goal: the restoration of the Union. But as the war progressed, more and more Northerners demanded that slavery, which they considered the basic cause of the conflict, be made a target. Lincoln well knew that in normal times slavery was beyond the reach of even a President, but he believed that the Constitution conferred unusual powers on

him in time of war. As early as July, 1862, he thought of issuing a proclamation of emancipation which would free the slaves in those states which had left the Union. Such an act would eliminate the possibility of European aid to the Confederacy—the people of Great Britain and France, in particular, would not permit their governments to go to the support of slavery—and it would be an inducement to slaves to leave Confederate masters and enlist in the Union armies. But when Lincoln broached the subject to his Cabinet he was persuaded to drop it. After a succession of Federal defeats, such a radical move would appear to be an act of desperation—"the last shriek on the retreat," in the vivid phrase of his Secretary of State.

Lincoln waited for a turn in the fortunes of the North. The Battle of Antietam, though not a decisive victory, gave him what he needed. On September 22, 1862, five days after the battle, he called a Cabinet meeting. Ever since his youth he had found in humor a temporary release from the world's cares, so he opened the meeting—perhaps the most momentous of his administration—by reading a page from one of the comic philosophers of the day. Becoming serious, the President reminded his ministers of the proclamation to which they had objected two months earlier. "Ever since then," he said, "my mind has been much occupied with this subject, and I have thought all along that the time for acting on it might very probably come. I think the time has come now. . . . When the rebel army was at Frederick, I determined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to any one; but I made the promise to myself, and"—here Lincoln hesitated—"to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise."

The President spoke quietly, but with the voice of authority.

"I have got you together to hear what I have written down. I do not wish your advice about the main matter—for that I have determined for myself. . . . If there is anything in the expressions I use, or in any other minor matter, I shall be glad to receive the suggestions."

Yet he spoke without arrogance. "I know very well that many others might, in this matter, as in others, do better than I can; and if I were satisfied that the public confidence was more fully possessed by any one of them than by me, and knew of any Constitutional way in which he could be put in my place, he should have it. I would gladly yield it to him. But though I believe that I have not so much of the confidence of the people as I had some time since, I do not know that, all things considered, any other person has more; and, however this may be, there is no way in which I can have any other man put where I am. I am here. I must do the best I can, and bear the responsibility of taking the course which I feel I ought to take."

On the following day the Proclamation of Emancipation was published to the world. It warned that if states in rebellion did not rejoin the Union by January 1, 1863, slaves held within their limit would be declared "forever free." The Confederate states ignored the warning—no one expected them to heed it—so the second and final proclamation was issued as promised. As far as freeing slaves was concerned it had little immediate effect, since it applied only to parts of the country over which the Federal government had no control. Yet it made the abolition of slavery the second major purpose of the war and led directly to the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution by which, in 1865, slavery was abolished throughout the United States.

In the immediate course of war, the Proclamation of Emancipation seemed to make no difference. A new commander of the Army of the Potomac, General Ambrose E. Burnside, was disastrously defeated in December, 1862. Lincoln, seeking desperately for a general who could win battles, replaced Burnside with Joseph Hooker, only to see Hooker throw away the Battle of Chancellorsville in early May, 1863. In the West, General Ulysses S. Grant appeared to be bogged down in his campaign to take the Confederate stronghold of Vicksburg and thus, by opening the Mississippi River to the Union forces, seal off the western part of the Confederacy from the eastern part.

Suddenly fortune favored the Union. In late June, General Lee began an invasion of the North which, if successful, would not only procure badly needed supplies for his army but also win back European sympathy for the South. On July 1 his army stumbled into the Army of the Potomac under still another commander, General George Gordon Meade, at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. For two days the armies lunged at each other, taking heavy losses with neither side gaining a decisive advantage. On the third day the Confederate general tried a desperate expedient, a frontal attack. In a magnificent display of military valor 15,000 gray-clad troops hurled themselves against the Union center, only to reel backward leaving half their number on the field.

The next day Lee, with a defeated, dejected army, headed south. As his troops moved toward the Potomac River, the telegraph wires brought word that the Confederate forces in Vicksburg had surrendered to Grant. Not since July 4, 1776, when the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, had there been such a joyous celebration of the natal day of American independence.

Although Lincoln was bitterly disappointed when Meade failed to pursue Lee after Gettysburg and smash the Confederate army, the President soon came to see that the North had scored victories that eventually assured the successful termination of the war. His confidence showed in a letter that he wrote to his old neighbors in Springfield six weeks after the twin victories. "The signs look better," he said. "The Father of Waters [the Mississippi River] again goes unvexed to the sea."

"Peace does not appear so distant as it did," he continued. The end of the war, with the Union cause triumphant, would prove that "there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their case, and pay the cost." For those who had criticized the Proclamation of Emancipation there were eloquent and sobering words: "There will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it."

Lincoln, the novice in warfare, had mastered his job, and knew that he had mastered it. So did his associates. It was at this time that one of his young secretaries, witty and not unduly impressed by authority, wrote of his superior: "The old man sits here and wields like a backwoods Jupiter the bolts of war and the machinery of government with a hand equally steady and equally firm."

Yet the war would drag on for almost two years more. And there would be severe reverses for the Union. But the set-backs neither shook the President's faith in ulti-

mate victory nor caused him to question in the least the goal for which he strove. If anything, the continuing loss of life, the suffering and pain and hardship that would not come to a speedy end, posed an ever-greater challenge to those who had so far escaped war's horror and destruction. Dedicating the military cemetery at Gettysburg four months after the battle, Lincoln told his audience that the brave men who had died on that field had created their own imperishable memorial. Their blood had hallowed the ground beyond the power of the living to add or detract. But the living had an obligation: "to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

That was the essence of the matter: not the restoration of the Union for its own sake, but the restoration of the Union to prove to the people of the whole world that democracy, a new form of government, could maintain itself against the most formidable attack.

With the year 1864, Lincoln's four-year term of office neared its end. Even within his own party he had many opponents. He was called too indecisive or too dictatorial, too lenient toward the enemy, too often an earthy humorist. But party discipline overcame the malcontents, and the President was nominated to succeed himself. However, nomination did not assure election. In the Democratic party large numbers despaired of Union victory, and were willing to make peace with the South on any terms

short of complete surrender. The turn of military events strengthened their position. In the spring of 1864 Grant, now in command of all the Union armies, had hurled the Army of the Potomac toward Richmond, Virginia, at the same time that Sherman had moved against Atlanta in Georgia. By mid-summer neither commander had reached his goal, and a cloud of pessimism had lowered over the country. Grant's troops in the East had taken so many casualties that the newspapers were referring to him as "the butcher," and while he had laid Richmond under siege, the Confederate capital gave no sign of surrendering. Sherman, though advancing steadily, was still short of his objective.

To President Lincoln the future looked bleak. One August morning he asked the members of his Cabinet to endorse a document without knowledge of its contents. In it he had written:

"This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President-elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards."

Eight days later Atlanta surrendered. Northern morale stiffened, Republican prospects brightened. Early in November Lincoln was triumphantly re-elected, this time by an absolute majority of more than 400,000 votes. With characteristic humility, he refused to accept the result as a personal tribute. The election, he told a group of serenaders, proved that a democracy could choose a new administration even in the midst of a great national crisis. Yet the election had not ended the rebellion. "May not all, having a common interest," he

asked, "re-unite in a common effort, to save our common country? For my own part I have striven, and shall strive to avoid placing any obstacle in the way. So long as I have been here I have not willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom."

On March 4, 1865, when Lincoln took the oath of office a second time, it was obvious that the end of the war was very close. Sherman had cut a broad lane of desolation from Atlanta to Savannah on the Atlantic coast, and was now moving north toward a junction with Grant, who was slowly strangling Richmond and Lee's army. In the West, the last strong Confederate army had been shattered by Federal troops.

Under the circumstances, most men would have been jubilant. Not Lincoln. Throughout the war he had mused on the role of God in the terrible conflict. He had been able to discern no purpose, yet his faith in an all-wise, omnipotent Providence had not been shaken. Reverently he spoke his thoughts:

"The Almighty has His own purposes. 'Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!' If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited

toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' "

If the ways of Providence were inscrutable, the path of duty remained clear.

*"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."*

Less than a month after Lincoln spoke, Lee made his last desperate move: he abandoned Richmond and tried to escape to the west. A week later overwhelming Union forces cornered his dwindling army. On April 9, 1865, he surrendered. The war was over.

Two days after the surrender the tired, gaunt President, his face worn with four years of care and sorrow, greeted a group that gathered on the White House lawn. "We meet this evening," he told them, "not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart. The evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond, and the surrender of the principal insurgent army, give hope of a righteous and speedy peace whose joyous expression cannot be restrained. In the midst of this, however, He, from Whom all blessings flow, must not be forgotten. A call for a national thanksgiving is being prepared, and will be duly promulgated."

The call would never be issued in Lincoln's name, nor would there be any other formal document, over his signature, proclaiming the end of the war. On the night of April 14 he attended the theater with Mrs. Lincoln. Midway through the play a

half-mad actor, John Wilkes Booth, burning to avenge the South, slipped into the theater and fired at short range. The President never regained consciousness, and died the following morning. As he drew his last breath, one of his Cabinet members murmured: "Now he belongs to the ages."

The sudden tragic death of Lincoln made him a hero overnight. Even bitter critics turned to eulogy. Yet it is a mistake to assume, as many Americans do, that no one recognized Lincoln's greatness in his lifetime. When he spoke at Gettysburg the first person to acclaim the merit of the address was Edward Everett, the principal orator of the occasion and one of the most cultivated men of the time. Before twenty-four hours had passed, Everett wrote to the President: "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes." Three days after Lincoln had delivered his second inaugural address Charles Francis Adams, Jr., a member of a family renowned for intellectuality and leadership, wrote to his father, the United States Minister to Great Britain: "This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical keynote of this war; in it a people seemed to speak in the sublimely simple utterance of ruder times."

Many Europeans saw Lincoln's greatness as soon as his own countrymen recognized it. *Punch*, the English magazine which had lampooned Lincoln without mercy, retracted its sneers and spoke of the American President as "a true born king of men." Disraeli said of the "Great Emancipator" that he had fulfilled his duty "with simplicity and strength" in "one of the severest trials which ever tested the moral qualities of man." French Liberals, headed by Victor Hugo, Louis Blanc, and Eugene Pelatan,

caused a medal to be struck on which were inscribed these words: "Dedicated by French Democracy to Lincoln, President, twice elected, of the United States—Lincoln, honest man, who abolished slavery, re-established the Union, saved the Republic without veiling the figure of Liberty." A contemporary observer wrote that when news of Lincoln's death reached Sweden, "Our men clenched their fists in vain fury and our blue-eyed women shed many tears in memory of the remarkable man."

Nevertheless, widespread recognition of Lincoln's true stature was years in coming. The full record of the war and his part in it had to be made known. His famous letter of consolation to Mrs. Bixby on the loss of her sons—"I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom"—was published in 1864, when it was written, but not until after Lincoln's death was the extent of his benevolent sympathy revealed. Then soldier after soldier testified to the fact that the President himself had remitted a severe sentence for some breach of military discipline; and many a mother told of husband or son released from the army because Lincoln, in the midst of crushing burdens, had heard the plea of one in dire trouble. Even toward those who had led the South to secession and had guided her in civil war he felt no resentment. "Judge not, that ye be not judged," was his response to men of his own party who talked of harsh penalties.

Moreover, the world itself had to move in the direction of democracy before this advocate of democracy could be valued at his worth. Then ever growing numbers could

understand that Lincoln spoke for something far larger than an abstract system of government, that he had stood for a way of living in which each individual would have the greatest possible opportunity to make the most of his capacities. "It is not merely for today," he told a group of soldiers late in the war, "but for all time to come, that we should perpetuate for our children's children that great and free government that we have enjoyed all our lives. I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen, temporarily, to occupy this White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has."

The world would see, too, that Lincoln had been faithful to the ideal. Believing himself to be authorized by the Constitution, he had exercised more arbitrary power than any other American President, and his critics had been numerous and outspoken. With the perspective that comes with the passage of time, it was seen that he had made no move to establish a dictatorship. Men had been imprisoned for disloyalty—and then released after short periods; when overzealous officers had suppressed critical newspapers he had set their orders aside. Nationwide elections were held twice during the course of the war, and not even Lincoln's bitterest opponents had suspected him of an intention to disregard the will of the people.

A fine biography of Lincoln, by Benjamin P. Thomas, published in 1952, is today available in the German, French, Spanish, Slovenian, Greek, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese languages—more eloquent testimony than monuments and tributes that the son of obscure parents, born in a lowly cabin, "imperfectly" educated through his own efforts, has become a figure of world significance.



# An Immortal Sign

LINCOLN AS A WORLD FIGURE by ROY P. BASLER

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THE people of the United States are approaching simultaneously two important anniversaries in their country's history—the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln in 1809 and the centennial of the Civil War in 1861. One approaches any anniversary with a sense of mystery and of ritual, for every anniversary is a reminder that something which began long ago is yet unfinished. And the questions of portent and meaning which confronted our fathers, and their fathers before them, remain with us, if not identical, still the recognizable variations on a theme which neither they nor we have fully comprehended. So, as an American approaching these anniversaries, one recognizes that repetition cannot be avoided, and seeks to make a virtue of necessity, citing Lincoln's own practice for justification. As a public speaker, Lincoln was one of the greatest repeaters in history, stating again and again some simple truths that needed repeating because, somehow, people were in his day, as in ours, great forgetters, who although they had often heard the truth, were unable to hold it fast much longer than a school boy can remember the lines he has memorized for a graduation exercise. We

remember, or should remember, in this age of conflict so similar in some respects to the age in which Lincoln lived, the memorable words of Lincoln not because they bring ready made answers to our problems, but because they may help us find our own answers, and perhaps may help us even to phrase them.

It is a real temptation when writing or speaking about Lincoln to do nothing but quote Lincoln, and perhaps one could do worse than merely read, with critical appreciation, the sculptured logic of his argument, savoring the poetic imagery and rhythms of his style. But, while not neglecting Lincoln's own words, perhaps it would be better, if one could do it, to try to formulate in brief the image of Lincoln which has become one of the enduring symbols in human history. Hence, what follows is an attempt to outline the major contribution which Lincoln made, not merely to the realm of thought and letters, or to the realm of politics, but in a broad scope to human life itself, as a man once flesh and blood and brain, but long since become a symbol and a myth, a story in the annals of humanity which runs as an unfailing spring for whoever thirsts for truth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said in his Essay on History:

*"The ultimate understanding of history demands that the student attain and maintain that lofty sight where facts yield their secret sense, and poetry and annals are alike. The instinct of the mind, the purpose of nature, betrays itself in the use we make of the signal narrations of history. Time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts. No anchor, no cable, no fences, avail to keep a fact a fact. Babylon, Troy, Tyre, Palestine, and even early Rome are passing already into fiction. The Garden of Eden, the sun standing still in Gideon, is poetry thenceforward to all nations. Who cares what the fact was, when we have made a constellation of it to hang in heaven an immortal sign?"*

Emerson's philosophical and poetic comment furnishes today not a conclusion, but rather a point of departure for certain observations about the place which America's most representative historical figure has achieved in the story of mankind. The American people and the people of the world at large have adopted Lincoln as a symbol and have placed him as a star of the first magnitude in the firmament of historical heroes. Not a few writers, as well as artists in other media, have produced major works of art inspired by and assisting in the perpetuation of the symbolic myth of Lincoln. What is this symbol and what does it imply as one traces it in Lincoln literature? It is in broadest terms the myth of a folk hero, noble in intellect, morally inspired, and imaginatively gifted, whose success was thwarted by the tragic flaw of ambiguity in the human nature which was his and his people's heritage. The myth itself is ambiguous, shifting and changing in its meaning as perceived and treated by different minds, but always revolving around the poles of our human nature that is dually free and constrained, right and wrong, good and bad. This mystery has been phrased and

rephrased in every age and all languages, but nowhere more succinctly than by the Psalmist's question addressed to the Divine Being: "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" The gamut of human dilemmas in a moral universe is unrolled throughout the life and personality of Lincoln, in the broadly ambiguous terms which may be similarly traced in the more or less legendary heroes of the deep past from Adam to Arthur or from Caesar to Cromwell. And a primary lesson of history may be learned from the extent of a multitude of facts which do nothing to diminish, but rather enforce, the symbolic import, as read in the factual record, of the hero whose life has been more rather than less rigorously recorded and studied.

Thus the figure of Lincoln represents the American people. The questions, who was Lincoln, how did he happen, where was he going, what did he mean, why was he so, was he good or bad, did he achieve or fail—these are the questions we ask of ourselves: who are we, how did we happen, where are we going, what do we mean, why are we so, are we good or bad, will we achieve or fail? The truth about Americans is the consistency of our contradictions, a practical and materialistic people but given to mysticism beyond measure, a selfish people whose largesse has been demonstrated to surpass the richest myths of antiquity, a self-reliant people who are so filled with self doubt that we crave more than anything else to be understood and appreciated—like a youth who believes in himself but wonders if after all he may not be a failure—an honest people who are shocked to discover our self-deceit and who strive to redefine our honesty to prevent self-deception. In Lincoln we have a epitome of what we are, we like to think, at our highest and best, as well as at our most ambiguous, and



we would believe that the world could know us better by studying his life and works.

All of this may sound mystical, and it is. In an individual human being or in a society, it is the mystical, artistic, creative intelligence which seeks to make something more than a sequence of facts out of the experience of human life. Even when this search goes by the name of "seeking to understand," the dual process is in truth "making it thus," and philosophically "knowing" and "creating" become one. It is for this reason that the study of biography and history is ultimately much the same study as the study of poetry and fiction, and to some people perhaps, the more fascinating of the two disciplines. To know the truth of history is to realize its ultimate myth and its inevitable ambiguity.

If the development of this theme appears to be following a line of thought which has been overworked somewhat in recent years by a school of literary criticism, it may be noted that most new ideas are old ones in new dress, and that both Emerson and Lincoln developed their similar philosophies of history before "symbolism," "myth", and "ambiguity" had become the shibboleths of Twentieth Century academic criticism, but long after Plato and Socrates had pondered many of the same problems. In any case, the validity of this interpretation must stand on its own feet, albeit indebted to many thinkers besides Emerson, and including Lincoln, who have recognized that factual reality may be, after all but a symbolic representation of a mystery, the meaning of which remains yet to be solved.

To illustrate, let us consider two key incidents, each with its set of circumstances amply if incompletely documented (there never has been complete documentation, of course, for any historical event). The first is the so-called beginning of the Civil War at

Fort Sumter, and the second is the emancipation of the slaves. These are only two of many key incidents in the history of the Civil War and in the public life of President Lincoln which illustrate the ambiguity of the historical myth, but they are chosen because they are well known and may thus represent the problem better than several hundred less known or even minor incidents in Lincoln's life which could equally well illustrate the theme.

The question of who started the Civil War has obviously not been settled to date, as anyone who is willing to read more than one book can demonstrate to his own satisfaction. Even though the preponderant number of opinions, if one counts opinions, or the preponderant weight of opinion, if one weighs opinion may seem to indicate that the South started it by firing on Fort Sumter, rather than that the North started it by "invading" Charleston Harbor with armed ships. When this question comes down to individuals, it is, whether it was Lincoln who started the war by ordering the expedition to relieve Fort Sumter, or any one of several assorted Confederates, ranging from General Beauregard, who certainly must have authorized the notification of intention to fire "within one hour" which bears the signatures of his Aides-de-Camp Chesnut and Lee, to Edmund Ruffin who is recorded as having fired the first gun. It is tragically humorous to reflect on the symbolic dispersal of even a "perhaps" assignment of final responsibility on the Confederate side. Every participant was *somewhat* responsible, but no individual was *finally* responsible in the Confederacy, least of all President Jefferson Davis, who was after all the President of a mere Confederacy. But on the Union side the symbolism is precisely the opposite; Lincoln was the final human authority, and he never questioned the fact

himself, although he understood clearly that this was a symbolic authority vested in him by the ballots of the American people. He made it clear, even though he did not expect agreement from the Confederates, that his intention to hold Sumter (as a symbol, be it noted, for its value as a base of operations was negligible) was not regarded by him as an act of aggression. The penultimate paragraph of his "First Inaugural Address" stated the position from which he could not retreat.

*"In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect and defend' it."*

In his "Annual Message to Congress," December 6, 1864, he reiterated in his final paragraph what he had said three and a half years earlier:

*"In stating a single condition of peace, I mean simply to say that the war will cease on the part of the government, whenever it shall have ceased on the part of those who began it."*

Thus the mystery of who started the Civil War centers in the mind of Lincoln. Did he order the expedition to relieve Fort Sumter as a cunning trick to solicit the first blow from the Confederacy in order to pretend that he was attacked when in fact he was attacking? This is the implicit premise of many and the affirmed premise of some members of a school of historical opinion which remains active, though in a minority, today. A more charitable as well as more philosophical way of putting the question would be: Did Lincoln order the expedition to relieve Fort Sumter as a symbolic force to illustrate to the secessionists that he did not recognize a symbolic sovereignty which most of the citizens of those states claimed

to reside in fact in the State as opposed to the Nation under the Constitution? There is this difference in the two questions. The first implies moral obliquity on the part of Lincoln, just as a similar obverse would imply moral obliquity on the part of Jefferson Davis and other secessionists; that is, did secessionists sponsor state sovereignty and the act of secession as a cunning trick in the guise of a moral right in order to perpetuate a ruling slavocracy in the South when it could no longer extend its power in the whole Union? The second question—did Lincoln order the expedition as a symbolic force to illustrate the symbolic sovereignty of the Union which he refused to abandon or to admit that the secessionists could abandon—not only implies but recognizes the political ambiguity of the Constitution itself on the matter of state versus federal sovereignty, as being the ultimate ambiguity which Lincoln hoped, if possible, to try to diminish gradually, if not to resolve finally, by ballots rather than bullets.

The whole question of who started the Civil War is thus a symbolic rather than a merely factual question, and it runs back, politically, psychologically, morally, and philosophically, to Cain and Abel and their distraughtly responsible father and mother. Who shall rule whom? Only the self-righteous, it seems to me, can read in Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" a statement of hypocrisy rather than a confession of sin and a prayer for absolution.

*"... Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. . . . Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The Almighty has his own purposes. 'Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!' . . . Fondly do we*

*hope—fervently do we pray. . . that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. . . .”*

Where is the tragic ambiguity of the human condition more poignantly set forth than in the record of the Civil War, or where more poetically symbolized than in Lincoln, the hero who recognized this ambiguity in himself and in the people whom he represented, or where more memorably expressed than in his words?

The second incident chosen to illustrate the symbolic ambiguity of the Lincoln myth is the promulgation of the “Emancipation Proclamation”. Did Lincoln free the slaves? At the time, his antagonists were quick to attack the Proclamation as a hoax, because its language limited emancipation specifically to those areas which were under Confederate control, and hence where Lincoln had no operational authority. Here again we are confronted with a symbolic action, as ambiguous in its meaning as is the language of the Proclamation itself, and yet it is the turning point in Lincoln’s Presidency. In promulgating the Proclamation Lincoln burned a bridge behind him. Until September 22, 1862, the date on which the preliminary proclamation was issued stipulating January 1, 1863, as the date on which emancipation would take effect, Lincoln had not advanced much beyond the position he had stated in collaboration with his colleague in the Illinois Legislature, Dan Stone, in a set of Resolutions entered in the “Illinois House Journal” under date of March 3, 1837, namely, “that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy . . . but that the Congress of the United States has no power, under the Constitution, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the different States.” As late as August 22, 1862, he had written Horace Greeley, the editor of the New York *Tribune*: “If I could save the Union

without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.” Yet, one month later, he issued the preliminary proclamation which pledged:

*“That on the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any state, or designated part of a state, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.”*

This was a promise, the fulfillment of which required not only the winning of the war but also the later enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment and the Fourteenth Amendment, and yet it marked a turning point, not only in American history but also in Lincoln’s personal thinking about slavery—that armed force should be used to set the Negro free in the rebel states as a means to the end of saving the Union.

Thus a symbolic act and a purely symbolic document established whatever facts of freedom the Negro may enjoy in the South today, but if anyone supposes that the ambiguities of that act and that document have been finally clarified by any Amendment to the Constitution, or by any court decision rendered to date, or by any executive action by the President of the present United States, he surely cannot have been reading the newspapers.

There have been no statues erected to Abraham Lincoln in the South, but if one were to be erected in recognition of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, it might well bear enscribed on its pedestal the passage which occurs in the second

paragraph of Lincoln's opening speech in the "Fourth Debate" with Stephen A. Douglas at Charleston, Illinois, September 18, 1858. Segregationist literature has cited this passage so often during the last two years that it is probably better known in the South today than anything else Lincoln wrote, including the "Gettysburg Address." This is what Lincoln said:

*" . . . I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races (applause)—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the White race."*

Of course, it would be expecting too much for the segregationists to quote the letter Lincoln wrote to Governor Michael Hahn of Louisiana on March 13, 1864, which indicates that Lincoln modified his views expressed at Charleston to some extent before he died. He wrote to Hahn as follows:

*"I congratulate you on having fixed your name in history as the first-free-state Governor of Louisiana. Now you are about to have a Convention which, among other things, will probably define the elective franchise. I barely suggest for your private consideration, whether some of the colored people may not be let in—as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks. They would probably help, in some trying time to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom. But this is only a suggestion, not to the public, but to you alone."*

Basically, we have in Lincoln's own words the unresolved ambiguity of freedom for the Negro. Is freedom the same for black as

for white? Are all men created equal?

All his political life Lincoln had been saying that the soul of America's being was the proposition in the "Declaration of Independence" that "all men are created equal." He had referred to this phrase in the "Declaration" many times during the campaign of 1858, in language which seems to be directly contradictory to the spirit and meaning of the language he used at Charleston; such as, for example, when he spoke at Chicago on July 10, calling it "the electric cord . . . that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world." How, if at all, can we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

The "Gettysburg Address" is Lincoln's highest expression, in poetic, symbolic terms, of how he conceived of the "Declaration," not as a statement of fact but as a symbolic proposition to the ultimate proving of which the nation was dedicated at its birth. Lincoln believed that "all men are created equal" in the only way that a mind as coldly logical as his could believe in it. Just how he believed it, is indicated by his use of the word "proposition." This word has proved a stumbling block even for highly literate readers who cannot conceive of the essential kinship of poetry and mathematics as creations of the human mind in the search for truth, and of both poetry and mathematics as theory providing a symbolic frame in which life may be understood. By his own account, Lincoln had "studied and nearly mastered Euclid," and we may be sure that he used the word "proposition" naturally in the Euclidian sense of a statement to be debated, and if possible verified or proved. Thus American democracy, as an active, living thing, meant to Lincoln the verification or proving of the proposition to which

its very existence was in the beginning dedicated. In 1863, eighty-seven years had gone into the proving, the Civil War had come at a critical stage in the argument, the Union armies had won a inconclusive victory on Gettysburg battlefield, and the affirmation that "all men are created equal" was still a live proposition, open to argument and inviting proof, but not on any account one that had already been proved. The further proof was for "us the living, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

It was thus that Lincoln believed in democracy, not as an already proven principle, nor as a meaningless form of words incapable of proof, but as the most viable political proposition about human life which the human mind had been able to conceive in the long history of civilization. The "Gettysburg Address" suggests that Lincoln's understanding of history was not far from Emerson's: "Who cares what the fact was, when we have made a constellation of it to hang in the heavens an immortal sign?"

Into Lincoln's concept was distilled the best thought of two thousand years of European civilization, striving to break the hold of tribal myth, to divest humanity of outworn social and political forms, and to create a political-social pattern in which men might live together without being either ruler or subject, master or slave. The concept was humanistic in that it projected the humanist's conviction that the mind of the individual man could give order and meaning to the impulse of the individual human life. To understand was to be free to act in harmony with fate in the pursuit of happiness. So Lincoln conceived the nation as a being with conflicting drives, hopes, and fears, but guided by reason—

not all-knowing, but capable of learning and growing, and capable of regeneration in the midst of decay. For this nation, conceived in liberty and perpetuating the free spirit which gave it birth, could not die so long as men lived who gave of their life, their liberty, and their happiness to preserve it.

Hence Lincoln phrased one of the most memorable passages in the English language, as a symbolic statement of the meaning of facts long since laid to rest in the tomb of history, but resurrected in the bloody travail of civil war to live again in a new era. On November 19, 1863, Lincoln said at Gettysburg battlefield:

*"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

*"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

*"But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."*

This symbolic conception of the "Declaration" was not new with Lincoln at Gettysburg, for he had many times before stated his recognition of the "immortal sign." One of his most pointed statements occurs in his letter to H. L. Pierce, April 6, 1859, written to be read at a festival honoring the birthday of Thomas Jefferson.

*"All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."*

But Lincoln was fully aware of the ambiguity of equality and freedom for all men, and of the symbolic role of the Constitution as "the picture of silver" framing "the apple of gold." Freedom and equality are completely ambiguous except under symbolic authority, and the symbolism of the Constitution undertakes to resolve this complete ambiguity by breaking it down into many symbolic parts, each of which contains its own ambiguity, and all of which are collectively referred to, somewhat euphemistically, as "a system of checks and balances."

Who shall rule whom? As there is no absolute answer possible except an ambiguous one, so there can be no practical, wholly unambiguous answer in any specific case. Lincoln pointed out in his "First Inaugural Address," that "No organic law can ever be framed with a provision specifically applicable to every question which may occur in practical administration." And in differences of opinion (based on ambiguities) arises the necessity that someone must acquiesce. "If the minority will not acquiesce," Lincoln continued, "the

majority must, or the government must cease. There is no other alternative; for continuing the government is acquiescence on one side or the other." But acquiescence on one side or the other, under constitutional government, cannot resolve finally the ambiguity of the human condition in which "all men are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." When Lincoln said on February 22, 1861, at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, that he would almost rather be assassinated than to give up that principle, he not only voiced recognition of the extreme to which a minority of one might go, but also avowed in the strongest language he ever used his own dedication to the most precious of all ambiguities, precious because, as he said, it gave hope "not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time." Not in certainty but in ambiguity lay the hope which to Lincoln, as one man, gave scope and meaning to the individual's quest for identity. This is the ultimate truth of the myth of Lincoln which inspires the poetry, the fiction, the drama, the statues, and the factual biographies as well, and it is the ultimate truth likewise of the myth of the American nation whose people Lincoln represented and still represents.

So far we have dealt with the Lincoln myth in terms of the ambiguity of its meaning to those who have studied it, and who by trying to understand, have to some extent created its symbolic proportions as lasting truth. All this is preface to what remains to be said about Lincoln the artist—the creative spirit that molded out of the circumstances of daily life and the historical events of the era in which he lived, a personal myth for himself, which is remarkably like the myth that literature (including biography and history) have made of him. Lincoln's



personal myth was the seed from which the historical myth has grown. Edmund Wilson, whose essay on Lincoln in *Eight Essays*, 1954, is almost the only distinctive piece of literary criticism by a critic of the first rank, has truly observed that "actually the poetry of Lincoln has not all been put into his writings. It was acted out in his life . . . he created himself as a poetic figure, and he thus imposed himself on the nation."

Lincoln's life was to him a quest for identity and a creation of identity, sparked by ambition so intense that no immediate failure could put it off and no success could satisfy its craving. This creative impulse, as with all men in some degree perhaps, took various channels, but two main currents—the political and the literary—run throughout his life and frequently blend into one. Lincoln seems never to have begun and never to have ceased to love to play with people and to play with words. This instinct was born with him. There is little reason to question the folk stories about his childhood oratory and versifying, or early proclivities for making friends and influencing people, when such activity produced the documented record of his maturity. The essential effort of his life was to identify himself, by words and in relationships to his contemporaries, as a representative, symbolic hero. He sought to play a role the action and words of which he would create for himself as circumstances and opportunity arose, but always with his mind's eye on the ultimate scene of the ultimate act, in which he would achieve his symbolic identity.

His first political address, dated March 9, 1832, announcing his candidacy for representative in the Illinois Legislature, concluded with a candid statement of this mission:

*"Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say*

*for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed."*

In 1858, after a quarter of a century, Lincoln's concept of his role had not materially changed. He had no pat solution to the problem of slavery, he sought to lead no crusade, but he hoped that in time the terrible ambiguity of human freedom and equality would gradually, in increasing measure, be resolved of necessity by new laws expressing the will of the majority, not of one state or one section, but of the United States. As to slavery, at that time the most that Lincoln hoped for, as he expressed it in the famous "House Divided Speech," on June 16, 1858, was that "the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction." By the end of the campaign, however, Lincoln had recognized slavery as the Nemesis of the personal role as hero which he had dreamed for himself. He concluded his last speech in the campaign on October 30, 1858, as follows:

*"Ambition has been ascribed to me. God knows how sincerely I prayed from the first that this field of ambition might not be opened. I claim no insensibility to political honors; but today could the Missouri restriction be restored, and the whole slavery question replaced on the old ground of 'toleration' by necessity where it exists, with unyielding hostility to the spread of it, on principle, I would, in consideration, gladly agree, that Judge Douglas should never be out, and I never in, an office, so long as we both or either, live."*

But this could not be, because Lincoln refused to accept as his final identity the role of a defeated Illinois politician, and because his Nemesis remained, still capable of dealing him, before the final retribution, a dubious success as President of a disintegrating nation. The ambiguity of his success was ever present to Lincoln's mind

from the moment of his election onward. Of his many frank recognitions of this ambiguity none is more succinct than the statement in a letter he wrote on April 4, 1864, to A. G. Hodges, editor of the Frankfort, Kentucky, *Commonwealth*. "I claim not to have controlled events," Lincoln wrote, "but confess plainly that events have controlled me." This was his clear judgment of his role as President after three years of war.

Four months later, having achieved the major part of his heroic identity, he spoke in one of his briefest and best speeches to the 166th Ohio Regiment on August 22, 1864, as follows:

*"... I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each one of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all*

*have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations."*

Such is the myth, from log cabin to White House, and lacking only the tragic denouement which Lincoln was further to live and create for himself down to the last scene in Ford's Theater on a Good Friday night, to a large extent made probable, if not indeed inevitable, by every choice of action which led up to it—such is the myth which Lincoln created, in his quest for identity, out of the ambiguity of his human nature. It is his story, it is America's story, it is the world's story. And what does it mean? Let us begin again to see if we can discover its meaning.

In a log cabin, on Knob Creek, in La Rue County, Kentucky, on February 12, 1809. . . .

But time has indeed "dissipated to shining ether the solid angularity" of that cabin, and its meaning is purely symbolic, "a constellation to hang in heaven an immortal sign." We must begin elsewhere. In America anywhere will do.



# Lincoln as Politician

BY DAVID DONALD

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WHEN President-Elect Abraham Lincoln reached Washington in February, 1861, cultivated Easterners were shocked by his appearance. Everything about him bespoke the Western provincial. He had an ambling Western style of walking and used awkward, untrained gestures. His clothing was ill-fitting, and he committed the social faux pas of wearing black kid gloves to the opera. He spoke with a coarse Western accent, and he told homely anecdotes from his apparently inexhaustible store of Western folk tales.

When first introduced to Lincoln, Charles Sumner, the elegant, Harvard-trained Senator from Massachusetts, was "greatly amazed and puzzled by what he saw and heard." Though he "noticed, now and then, flashes of thought and bursts of illuminating expression" in Lincoln's conversation, he found the President-Elect woefully lacking in dignity, social poise, and breadth of culture, and he "could not get rid of his misgivings as to how this seemingly untutored child of nature would master the tremendous task before him." Charles Francis Adams, of the famous Massachusetts family, shared Sumner's doubts about this "tall, illfavored man, with little grace of manner or polish of appearance," and concluded that both Lincoln and his wife were "evidently wanting in all the arts to grace their position."

Though Adams and Sumner may have

been correct in their appraisal of Lincoln's personal appearance, they quite obviously misjudged the new President in other respects. Misled by his Western mannerisms, they failed to observe that "this seemingly untutored child of nature" was master of at least one of the "arts" requisite for success as an American President—the fine art of politics. Recognizing early in his career that "the man who is of neither party is not, and cannot be, of any consequence" in American life, Lincoln brought to the White House a realistic understanding that the most statesmanlike policies enunciated by a President are of no consequence unless they are backed up by effective political support. Even in the oppressive crisis of the Civil War, he understood that the American President must be not merely titular head of state, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and chief administrative officer of the government, but also the head of his political party, an astute manager of the political machinery.

Lincoln's realism about the President's role as politician derived from his long experience in Illinois public life. For more than 26 years before he became President, politics was his passion. For four successive terms he served as Whig member of the Illinois House of Representatives (1837-41), during part of which he was his party's floor leader; for one term (1847-49) he was a member of the United States House of Representatives in Washington; during most of the other years

before the 1860 election he was campaigning either for himself or for his party. His active participation in the rough-and-tumble game of Western politics gave him an intimate acquaintance with what his partner delicately called the "details of how we get along," and in very large measure his success in Washington stemmed from the lessons he had learned during his Illinois apprenticeship.

In part these lessons were negative. Through painful experience he became convinced that in politics personalities do not pay. With a quick wit and a lively style, Lincoln early fell into the habit of making fun of his political opponents, and for a time he was apparently greatly pleased with the applause these tactics won him.

But in 1842 he made a great mistake in satirizing the rather dandified Democratic state auditor of Illinois, James Shields. Shields, Lincoln joked, seemed to think he was irresistible to the ladies; his very features appeared to speak audibly and distinctly: "Dear girls, *it is distressing*, but I cannot marry you all. Too well I know how much you suffer; but do, *do* remember, it is not my fault that I am *so* handsome and *so* interesting." The hot-tempered Irish auditor promptly challenged Lincoln to a duel, and only at the last minute was bloodshed averted.

The whole affair caused Lincoln the keenest embarrassment, and years later the merest mention of it made him unhappy. Never again did he permit himself to become involved in a personal altercation. Despite all the pressures upon him in the White House, no political opponent was ever able to prick him into personal recriminations. "No man resolved to make the most of himself can spare the time for personal contention," he had learned. "Better give your path to a dog, than be bitten by him in

contesting for the right. Even killing the dog would not cure the bite."

From a dozen political campaigns in Illinois Lincoln had also learned the danger of being doctrinaire. Long before he became President he observed that attachment to inflexible solutions and ideological labels could only lead to political impotence. In 1844, for example, he energetically supported Henry Clay for President, believing that the Kentuckian, though himself a slaveholder, would not permit the further expansion of slavery. Simon-pure abolitionists took the opposing view—how could a real antislavery man vote for a slaveholder?—and they wasted their votes on the doctrinally pure but politically hopeless third-party candidate. Their vote helped elect James K. Polk and to bring on the Mexican War.

To Lincoln the abolitionists' way of thinking seemed "wonderful." To their contention that "We are not to do *evil* that *good* may come," he countered with another, more apt Biblical injunction: "By the *fruit* the tree is to be known."

As President, Lincoln had many occasions to remember his own advice. At the end of the Civil War, facing the crucial problem of restoring the subjugated Southern states to the Union, he recognized the danger of becoming "inflexibly committed to any single plan of reconstruction." He had his own program for the speedy, secure reestablishment of the Union, but he knew that doctrinaire insistence upon it might result only in the defeat of the very objective he sought to promote.

Lincoln's Illinois experience also warned him of the perils of a direct appeal to the people. The American President is frequently tempted—and often urged—to take his case straight to the voter in an attempt to override opposition to his policies in Congress.

It was a tactic Lincoln never employed. He had every faith in the democratic process; he believed that the American experiment in self-government was "the last, best hope of earth"; he saw as the central idea of the great struggle in which the nation was engaged the task "of proving that popular government is not an absurdity." But with his trust in the people, Lincoln also had come to understand that a hasty appeal for support might find the electorate temporarily ill-informed or the political machinery through which they must speak poorly organized.

Lincoln himself, it must be remembered, had never been a spectacular vote-getter in Illinois. He was never chosen to major office by the people of his state; state legislator and one-term member of Congress he was, but never governor and never senator. His vigorous debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 gained him a majority of the popular vote, but, because of the inequitable arrangement of the electoral system, he did not win the election. In the campaign of 1860 only a minority of the American people voted for Lincoln.

Understandably, then, Lincoln was reluctant to risk the prestige of the presidency upon an appeal to the people which, in those days before the advent of mass media of communication, could only bring limited success and which, if unsuccessful, might permanently impair his executive leadership.

Not merely Lincoln's service in the Illinois legislature but his term in the United States House of Representatives stood him in good stead as wartime President. Experience taught him that, in the American form of government, there is a certain inevitable amount of tension between the Congress and the President. From observing the fierce animosity which grew up between President John Tyler and Henry Clay, who

led the Whig party in the Senate, and the deadlock which existed between President Zachary Taylor and his Congressional party leaders during the 1850 crisis, Lincoln knew that such tension, if exacerbated, could render his administration impotent. He resolved not to permit incidents to arise between the executive and legislative branches of the government and especially not to allow himself to become alienated from the Congressional spokesmen of his own party.

When Senator Sumner, for example, rose publicly to denounce the Administration's plan for reconstructing Louisiana as a "mere seven months' abortion, begotten by the bayonet, in criminal conjunction with the spirit of caste, and born before its time, rickety, unformed, unfinished," Lincoln did not take offense but wisely ignored this strong language. "I think I understand Mr. Sumner," he said; "and I think he would be all the more resolute in his persistence . . . if he supposed I were at all watching his course. . . ."

Remembering his own experience as a Congressman and exercising his sense of humor, Lincoln was able to endure abuse from members of his own party under which a newcomer to politics might well have flinched. When Republicans openly announced that the President was "as stubborn as a mule," a man "at heart with Slavery," "a Damed [*sic*] old traitor," "as near lunacy as any one not a pronounced Bedlamite," Lincoln could recall that he himself had once been an expert in vituperation. In 1848, for instance, he had denounced Democratic President Polk as "a bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man," who, having deliberately precipitated the Mexican War, must feel "the blood of this war, like the blood of Abel . . . crying to Heaven against him." It takes a veteran politician to remember that politicians like

to talk—and that most of their talk is for buncombe.\*

Along with these negative lessons, Lincoln's career in Illinois politics had taught him the importance, in a decentralized, democratic government like ours, of special favors and patronage as the surest way of binding local political bosses to the person and principles of the President. From his years in the Illinois legislature Lincoln recognized that local interests are often as important to a representative as his party's public platforms.

Lincoln himself, during his first session in the legislature, had spent most of his time sponsoring bills to authorize his friend Samuel Musick to build a toll bridge across Salt Creek and to name three other friends "to view, mark and permanently locate a road from Springfield to Miller's Ferry." His repeated re-election to the legislature had been chiefly due to his success in removing the state capital from southern Illinois to Springfield. As the only Whig Congressman from Illinois in 1849, he learned the great importance of having the new Whig President, Zachary Taylor, distribute the Federal patronage to his active and loyal party supporters, and, having himself made an unsuccessful attempt to become Commissioner of the General Land Office after failing to be re-elected to Congress, he knew firsthand the immense value office seekers placed upon the government favors they were seeking.

\* Reference to member from Buncombe in N. Carolina speaking needlessly in Congress to impress his constituents. Hence, bunkum.

Consequently Lincoln brought to the White House an extraordinarily frank and realistic use of the power and the positions at his disposal. The importunities of office seekers naturally tired him, and he chafed occasionally at the burden thrust upon him. Nevertheless he recognized the importance of taking time, even at the height of the secession crisis, to decide between rival candidates for the Chicago post office and to appoint the naval officer for the port of Boston.

For the favors he distributed Lincoln demanded—and he received—the support of the politicians. Virtually every major measure advocated by his administration was enacted into law, and Lincoln himself became the first President in a quarter of a century to achieve re-election. Since patronage was the necessary grease for the party machinery upon which he depended, Lincoln was pleased that it was used efficiently. As Chief Executive he proudly claimed that his had "distributed to its party friends as nearly all the civil patronage as any administration ever did."

All these lessons from Lincoln's Illinois apprenticeship amounted to a single rule: to be successful, an American President must be not merely a statesman but also a politician. If it is something of a shock to picture the Great Emancipator as the Great Politician, one must remember the observation of that astute British historian, Mr. Denis W. Brogan, that "the United States was made by politicians."

# Lincoln, the Military Strategist

BY T. HARRY WILLIAMS

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IF A MODERN poll organization had existed at the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861 and if it had asked which President of the rival governments would make the greater war director, what answer would it have received? Undoubtedly the average informed observer would have predicted that the head of the Southern states would outshine his Northern opponent. Such a judgment seemed justified by the backgrounds of the two men.

Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States, was a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, then the only advanced military school in the country. He had served as a combat officer in the Mexican War, and he had been Secretary of War in President Franklin Pierce's Cabinet. Abraham Lincoln had had no military education and no military experience, except for a brief and inconsequential interlude as a militia captain in a small Indian war.

And yet Lincoln turned out to be a great war director and Davis a mediocre one. The war records of the two executives demonstrate better than any other example in history the truth of one of Clausewitz's dicta. The great German had said that an acquaintance with military affairs was not the principal qualification for a director of war but that "a remarkable, superior mind and strength of character" were more important. Fortunately for the cause of Ameri-

can nationality, these were qualities that Lincoln possessed in eminent degree.

The American Constitution clearly stated that the President was the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Thus Lincoln's authority to direct the Northern war effort was almost unlimited. But the command system with which he had to work was loosely and inadequately organized; in fact, in the modern sense it was not a system at all. In the entire military organization there was no agency charged with the function of planning strategy or of integrating strategy with national policy.

The army possessed a body known as the "general staff," but it bore little resemblance to a modern staff. The members were the heads of the bureaus in the War Department: the quartermaster general, the chief of ordnance, the adjutant general, and others. Its work was completely technical and administrative, and each bureau head went pretty much his own way with little supervision from above.

Presiding over the staff and the rest of the army organization was the general in chief, the general officer with the senior commission. In 1861 the occupant of this position was Winfield Scott, who was 75 years old and in such bad health that he could hardly walk.

Scott was one of the two officers in the service who before the war had commanded men in numbers large enough to be called

an army; the other was John E. Wool, who was two years older than Scott. And the army that Scott had led in the Mexican War (1846) numbered only 14,000 men. Small as this force had been, it was the largest aggregation of troops that the younger officers—except a few who had visited Europe—had ever seen. Not one of the junior officers had directed the evolutions of as large a unit as a brigade.

Most members of the officer corps were able, after the war began, to adjust their thinking to the requirements of the mass armies that came into being. But they had great difficulty in altering their concepts of strategy to meet the realities of modern war. Most American officers were trained in the eighteenth-century tradition of war. War was something that was fought between armies and that did not involve civilian societies; it should be directed by professional soldiers without interference by political officials; and it could be so conducted—by adept maneuver—that victory would result without a showdown battle.

If there had to be a decisive engagement, American soldiers thought it should be fought by the maxims laid down by Henri Jomini, the brilliant Swiss who had served under Napoleon. According to Jomini, or more accurately, according to the American interpretation of him, the largest possible force should be concentrated at one point for one big effort against the enemy.

Most of Lincoln's generals could not understand that many of Jomini's ideas did not apply to their war. In a country as large as the United States and with the North enjoying a distinct numerical superiority, it was possible to mount two or more big offensives simultaneously. And the first Northern generals failed to realize that in a democracy and in a modern war the civilian authorities would insist, and rightly so, on

having a voice in the conduct of the conflict.

Almost immediately Lincoln demonstrated that he possessed great natural powers as a strategist. His very first acts were bold and imaginative moves for a man dealing with military questions for the first time. He grasped the importance of naval warfare, and proclaimed a naval blockade of the South. He saw that human and material resources were on his side, and called for the mobilization of over 400,000 men. He understood the advantage that numbers gave the North, and—contrary to Jominian strategy—urged his generals to maintain a constant and relentless pressure on the whole line of the Confederacy until a weak spot was found and a breakthrough could be made. And departing from eighteenth-century concepts, he realized that the principal objective of his armies was to seek contact with the Confederate armies and not to occupy Southern territory.

During the first three years of the war, Lincoln performed many of the functions that in a modern command system would be assigned to the chief of the general staff or to the joint chiefs of staff. He framed policy, devised strategy, and even on occasion directed tactical movements. For this he has been criticized by some writers, who contend that he "interfered" too much with matters outside his proper sphere. But in judging Lincoln's actions, it must be remembered that he operated in the absence of a formal command system. If Lincoln had not acted no action would have resulted.

Moreover, it was fortunate for the Union cause, in most cases, that he interfered. Many of his alleged interventions were nothing more than attempts to force his generals to fight, to execute the role for which generals and armies supposedly are created. Sometimes Lincoln erred—because he lacked technical military knowledge or

because he neglected such mundane problems as supplies and transportation. But the vital point is that even when he was wrong he acted from a sound military basis: to make an offensive strategy more offensive. Conversely, it may be said that Davis's great error was to interfere from a faulty basis to make a defensive strategy more defensive.

In the beginning months of the war, Lincoln naturally turned to old General Scott for strategic counsel. He soon discovered that Scott lacked the qualities required in a general in chief. Asked by Lincoln to present an overall plan, Scott came up with a design that called for a naval blockade of the Southern coast and the occupation of the Mississippi River line. The South would be enfolded in a gigantic circle—and with the drawing of the circle Scott would stop. The North could then sit back and wait for the besieged South to yield.

This was the famous “anaconda plan” to squeeze the Confederacy into submission. Although it had obvious merits (the blockade and the Mississippi line became staple items in Northern strategy), it also had basic defects. For one thing, the plan would be a long time in making its possible effects felt. More important, it represented, as Lincoln the civilian saw, the one-weapon or the one-service idea of war. No single strategic procedure was going to win the Civil War.

By November of 1861 Scott had been persuaded to retire. To the post of general in chief Lincoln named George B. McClellan, who was also the field commander of the principal Federal army in the Eastern theater. The young, thirty-five-year-old McClellan demonstrated almost immediately that he did not possess the abilities to plan and direct the movements of a number of armies. At Lincoln's request, he too prepared

a strategic design. He proposed that an army of 273,000 men be placed under his command in the Eastern theater. The navy would land this host on the Virginia coast, from whence McClellan would march inland and capture Richmond, the Confederate capital. In a series of similar operations, the army would conquer and occupy the entire Eastern seaboard of the Confederacy.

On almost every count, the plan was defective. It demanded too much of available resources. The government could not have assembled that many men in one theater, or housed and fed them if assembled. Nor did the sea transport exist to take the troops where McClellan wanted to operate. McClellan's scheme, calling for a supreme concentration of effort in one theater, was a complete example of Jominian strategy. Lincoln must have been amazed when he read the document, which he filed safely away without comment.

Outside of this proposal, McClellan indulged in no general strategic planning worthy of the name. When he took the field in the spring of 1862, Lincoln relieved him as general in chief on the grounds that one man could not direct an army engaged in active operations and at the same time plan moves for other armies. The President did not appoint another officer to the position until July.

In the interim Lincoln acted as his own general in chief. There can be little doubt that by this time he had come to have serious misgivings about the professional soldiers. Inclined at first to defer too much to their opinions, he now felt a growing confidence in his own powers to decide military questions, and he was perhaps a little too ready to impose his opinions on the generals.

Nevertheless, in this period Lincoln did not presume to dispense completely with



expert advice. Secretary of War Stanton had convened an agency known as the Army Board, consisting of the heads of the bureaus in the War Department. This was only the general staff brought together under a chairman, but the transformation of the bureau chiefs into a collective body was a forward step in command. Lincoln frequently consulted the Board before arriving at an important decision.

Despite his increasing doubts about soldiers, Lincoln seemed to sense that there was something wrong in the existing arrangement. He, a civilian, was doing things that should be done by a military man. Again he decided to fill the post of general in chief. In July, 1862, he named to the position Henry W. Halleck, who had been a departmental commander in the Western theater.

General Halleck seemed to be the ideal man for the job. Before the war he had been known as one of the foremost American students of the art of war, the translator of Jomini into English and an author in his own right. Moreover, he had been a capable administrator. Lincoln intended that Halleck should be a real general in chief, that he should, under the authority of the President, actually plan and direct operations.

At first Halleck acted up to his role—but not for long. His great defect was that he disliked responsibility. He delighted to provide technical knowledge and to advise, but he shrank from making decisions. Gradually he divested himself of his original function and deliberately assumed the part of an adviser and an informed critic.

Halleck's refusal to perform the requirements of his position forced Lincoln to act again as general in chief, but he kept Halleck as titular head of the office. The President had discovered that Halleck could do one valuable service for him—in the area of military communications. Often Lincoln

and his generals had had serious misunderstandings because, almost literally, they spoke different languages, Lincoln the words of the lawyer-politician and the generals the jargon of the military. Halleck had lived in both the civil and the military worlds, and he could speak the language of both. Increasingly Lincoln came to entrust the framing of his directives to Halleck.

In those years of lonely responsibility when Lincoln directed the war effort he grew steadily in stature as a strategist. Usually he displayed greater strategic insight than most of his commanders. But he was willing, as he had been earlier, to yield the power to frame and control strategy to any general who could demonstrate that he could do the job—if he could find the general. By 1864 both he and the nation were certain they had found the man—Ulysses S. Grant. And in that year the United States finally achieved a modern command system to fight a modern war.

In the system arrived at in 1864, which was the joint product of Lincoln and Congress, Grant was named general in chief, charged with the function of planning and directing the movements of all Union armies. Grant, because he disliked the political atmosphere of Washington, established his headquarters with the field army in the Eastern theater, but did not technically command that army. In the new arrangement Halleck received a new office, "chief of staff." He was not, however, a chief of staff in today's sense of the term. Primarily he was a channel of communication between Lincoln and Grant and between Grant and the 17 departmental commanders under Grant. The perfect office soldier, he had found at last his proper niche.

As general in chief, Grant justified every belief in his capacities. He possessed in superb degree the ability to think of the war



in over-all terms. But his grand plan of operations that ended the war was partly Lincolnian in concept. Grant conformed his strategy to Lincoln's known ideas: hit the Confederacy from all sides with pulverizing blows and make enemy armies the main objective. The general submitted the broad outlines of his plan to Lincoln, and the President, trusting in Grant, approved the design without seeking to know the details.

The 1864 command system embodied the brilliance of simplicity: a commander in chief to lay down policy and grand strategy, a general in chief to frame specific battle strategy, and a chief of staff to co-ordinate information. It contained elements that later would be studied by military leaders and students in many nations. Abraham Lincoln, without fully realizing his part, had made a large and permanent contribution to the story of command organization.



# Lincoln and the Meaning of the American Union

BY DAVID M. POTTER

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has published three books on Lincoln and his times*

AT THE one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, his reputation stands as high in the United States as that of any American. Lincoln is enshrined in the memory of his fellow-countrymen as one who saved the Union, freed the slaves, and typified the distinctive qualities of the American character at its best. He has also long enjoyed a great reputation outside his own country, and even before the United States attained world importance, biographical accounts of him had appeared in more than thirty languages.

Lincoln's world reputation has always had an element of the paradoxical, for in his personal qualities he was more conspicuously American and was less at home in a cosmopolitan or international milieu than any other major American leader. By contrast, George Washington, reared in the planter society of Colonial Virginia, was trained to the code and pattern of the English gentry; Thomas Jefferson at an early age imbibed the international ideas of the Age of Reason; Woodrow Wilson was reared by a British-born mother in a Presbyterian manse in Georgia which was probably more Scottish than Georgian in its influences; and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born to a patrician

family which visited Europe every year and employed French and German governesses for young Franklin. Lincoln was the only one of these men who never went outside the present United States. Compared with the others, he seems as American as the log cabin in Kentucky where he was born. His lanky, gangling, railsplitter's frame, the frontier accent and idiom of his speech, and his prairie mannerisms all marked him as a product of the American West.

Yet it is part of the complexity of his character that if he was the most purely American of major American figures, he was also the least narrowly American. There was a universal quality about him which transcended national identity and led his biographer, Lord Charnwood, to say, "He was a citizen of that far country where there is neither aristocrat nor democrat."

The anomaly is all the more striking because, in terms of world significance, Lincoln was not directly concerned with any matters of international character, as was Jefferson with the Enlightenment's doctrine of the rights of man, or Wilson with the League of Nations, or Franklin Roosevelt with the United Nations. In fact, he is, in one primary sense, a symbol of American nationalism, for it was he who saved the

Union of States from dissolution in the American Civil War and he who affirmed that the war was fought to test whether "that nation or any nation . . . conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . . can long endure." In an era of national consolidation, when Cavour was making a nation of the Italian states and Bismarck was making a nation of the German states, Lincoln was at the same time making a nation of the American states. A literal-minded historian could easily write Lincoln down simply as a nationalist, and his role as the Emancipator of the slaves could be interpreted as a mere means to the end of preserving the American Union.

In terms of his own activities and of what was important to him, the question of the Union was uppermost from the moment when he became President on March 4, 1861. The country was then in the midst of a crisis caused by the fact that seven Southern states (later joined by four others) had adopted acts seceding, as they claimed, from the Union and forming a Southern Confederacy. When Lincoln tried to uphold the national authority by maintaining a garrison at Fort Sumter in the harbor at Charleston, South Carolina, this force was attacked and war followed. Though Lincoln was the least warlike of men, he accepted the necessity of war for the sake of the Union, and for four years he persevered in a grim and consuming conflict. During this time, he, more than anyone else, subordinated himself in seeking the aid of all factions which would support the Union. He, most of all, was firm in the face of military disasters which caused others to despair of the Union. Toward the end, he led the way in advocating a generous peace, "with malice toward none," because he knew that ultimately the restoration of the Union depended upon winning back the loyalty of the Confederates after they were

defeated, and that conciliating them was as important as defeating them. When he was assassinated at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, the tragedy came at a moment of climax, for the principal Confederate army under General Robert E. Lee had surrendered only five days earlier, and Lincoln, knowing that the Union had been saved, died almost in the moment of attaining the great object of his career.

In a world that has grown to dread the disruptive force of modern nationalism, however, it could no longer be taken as a proof of Lincoln's greatness that he made one strong nation grow where there might have been two weaker ones. It would also not be sound to base a claim to world-recognition for Lincoln simply on the fact that he laid the foundations of the present political power of the "American colossus." Nationalism is not enough, and if Lincoln's only credential of greatness were his role as the "Savior of the Union," his world-reputation would necessarily fall, even though the world-influence of the Union which he saved has risen.

Lincoln, himself, however, would have been the first to repudiate the idea that the destiny of the American Union was all that mattered to him. Saving the Union was, to be sure, his justification for one of the most deadly wars ever fought up to that time, and the preservation of this Union was, to his mind, essential. "My paramount object in this struggle," he said, "is to save the Union." But though the Union was an indispensable means, it was only a means, and not an end in itself. For the Union was not only the instrument of American nationhood; it was also the instrument of human democracy—the instrument of a democracy which did not seem entirely safe in the world 90 years ago, just as it seems far from safe today. Lincoln always thought of the American nation not as a thing to be exalted or

glorified for itself, but as a medium for broader human values. It is, indeed, a striking fact that in his classic dedication of the nation, his address at Gettysburg, he did not use the terms "United States," "America," "Americanism," or even "Union." He spoke, to be sure, of the nation which "our fathers brought forth," but this one nation was linked, in his thought, with "any other nation so conceived and so dedicated." He affirmed that the sacrifices of those who had given their lives could be justified if "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom," but this goal was not for America alone but was important because it would mean that "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

With haunting regularity the thought recurred in Lincoln's words that the nation was not to be cherished for its own sake, so much as for the sake of the principles for which it stood. When Lincoln eulogized Senator Henry Clay, who had also served the cause of Union by helping to arrange three major compromises between North and South, he attributed to Clay the kind of patriotism which was very much his own. "Mr. Clay," he said, "loved his country partly because it was his own country and mostly because it was a free country. . . . He desired the prosperity of his countrymen . . . chiefly to show to the world that free men could be prosperous." Of the Civil War, he said that it embraced "more than the fate of these United States," and was of concern "to the whole family of man." The Union seemed essential to Lincoln not because of the maintenance of authority at Washington, but because of the "necessity that is upon us of proving that popular government is not an absurdity."

Perhaps no one has understood the universality of Lincoln's significance better than

the late Professor James G. Randall who packed a world of meaning into the bare statement that Lincoln fused the cause of Union with the cause of freedom. Although Lincoln appears in history as an American figure fighting an American war for an American political objective, he was, in fact, more prone to think in terms of his fellow mortals than of his fellow citizens.

A realistic appraisal of Lincoln's significance a century and a half after his birth ought properly to begin with a straightforward recognition that he was identified with ideas which no longer pass unchallenged in the modern world. He believed in nationhood, he believed in democracy, and he believed further in something which excites especial skepticism today, namely that the American nation was dedicated to a mission of preserving democracy for the world. Yet once these facts are recognized, it should also be recognized that he conceived of each of these commonplace ideas in a way that rendered it no longer commonplace but cast it into a new perspective. The nation was important, not for its own sake, but as a device for nurturing values in which "the whole family of man" might share.

Democracy was not an infallible, fool-proof device by which the will of the people registered the will of God; in fact, Lincoln knew from bitter experience the limitations of democracy, and owed most of his success to his superlative sense of how to work within these limitations without being constricted by them. His conviction was not a naive belief in a political panacea, but a tempered, chastened faith that, fallible though it be, rule with the consent of the people is better than rule without their consent. "As I would not be a slave," said Lincoln, "so I would not be a master." If his political creed can have any meaning today, it is not because he worshiped

democracy with blind devotion but because he perceived all the imperfections of democracy and still believed in it.

In an age when many opponents of popular government throughout the Western world pointed to the apparent dissolution of the American union as a proof that freedom could not be reconciled with strength, and that democracy could not survive under stress, Lincoln felt a deep conviction that the United States must vindicate her faith, and thus bear witness to the world. This was not a mission of "Manifest Destiny" to extend the area of the republic or to impose American institutions on other countries. It was not a mission to proselytize for the "American Way of Life." It was not even an assurance that the United States had perfected democracy as a product suitable for export. Rather, it was a belief that humanity had much at stake in America and that the supreme obligation of Americans in the world was to find the means of protecting that stake. The ultimate question as he saw it was not whether the world would follow an example set by the United States, but whether the United States could rise to the challenge of setting an example of value to the world. Of all the great apostles of democracy, he was most concerned with exemplifying it, and least concerned with propagating it.

It is distinctive of Lincoln's personality

that while he was very locally an American—a railsplitter, a frontiersman, and a prairie lawyer—his American qualities accentuated rather than diminished his essential humanity. Instead of separating him from people of other countries, his national traits made him seem more universal than a more cosmopolitan figure could have been, for they gave concrete and specific content to his universal qualities. Thus, his Americanism made his humanity less abstract and more tangible.

The same paradox holds for Lincoln's public role as the preserver of the American Union. What he sought for his own country brought into focus his aspirations for the "whole family of man," and it was this broad aspiration which defined his Americanism rather than his Americanism which defined the aspiration. This kind of Americanism made him more universal than a more international figure could have been, for it, too, gave concrete and specific content to his universal aspirations. If the figure of Lincoln, which seemed so towering in the nineteenth century, continues to loom large in the twentieth, after so much of his world has been swept away, it will be because of his unique capacity to ennoble what was local by infusing it with values which were universal, and to humanize what was universal by enriching it with the local flavor and tang of his native land.

# Lincoln and Democracy

BY T. V. SMITH

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## *I. Democracy Described*

IN A WORLD where the very meaning of democracy is made ambiguous by diverse usages, it is best to indicate our understanding of the term before we utilize it to appraise and to praise Abraham Lincoln. Our description must be ample to do justice to complexity. *Democracy is an ideology; it is a way of life; it is a form of government.*

As an ideology, democracy is such emphasis upon the ideal of equality as prevents liberty from turning into license (which it is wont to do) and prevents fraternity from becoming fanaticism (which it is most prone to do). As a way of life, it is ability to stomach if not to love cultural variety. And as a form of government, democracy is organization to facilitate compromise, despite deep differences among participants as to what in particular cases is just and right. *Democracy is, in short, a pluralistic way of thought and a tolerant way of action.*

Abraham Lincoln is America's best exemplification in the flesh of both this way of thought and this method of collective action. Before we turn to these points, however, let us observe that Lincoln's democracy was a profound feeling before it was either thought or action. Lincoln was not only a democrat; he was a "democratical" sort of man. He spontaneously accorded the other man the rights he claimed for himself. "As

I would not be a slave," said he, "so I would not be a master." This attitude is no deduction from dogma but a simple extension of feeling that lay deep in his frame. His feeling was furthered by the biographical fact that Lincoln had none of the external trappings for any of the elites to which he belonged. He was a natural aristocrat without the desire to exclude anybody from any rank to which nature had assigned him. America, like Whitman the poet, had come "more and more to rely upon his idiomatic western genius, careless of court dress or court decorum." Lincoln had the ready friendliness of a man lonesome from too much solitude. Whitman's question, addressed as it was to the social cosmos, would have appeared to Lincoln the rhetorical query it was to Whitman: *If you meet me and I meet you, why should we not speak to one another?*

## *II. Lincoln's Conduct was Democratic*

Lincoln was a democrat in action because he believed that no basis for common action exists save by achieved agreement. No man is wise enough, not even Abraham Lincoln, to dictate public policy, not even out of his private conscience. Since good men do as a matter of observation differ, and differ profoundly, and differ permanently, the "engineering of consent" becomes the only way of getting men together for common action.



This spells the odious thing to idealists called "compromise."

It was the "Dred Scott decision" of the American Supreme Court which awakened Lincoln from his civic slumber. This decision set aside, or Lincoln thought it did, a national compromise which had long kept the tenuous peace over slavery and for which no substitute compromise was in sight. Lincoln puts this matter more feelingly than any other man of his time. His words are these:

*"The Missouri Compromise ought to be restored. For the sake of the Union it ought to be restored . . . the spirit of national compromise—that spirit which has thrice saved the Union. . . . We thereby restore the national faith, the national confidence. We thereby reinstate the spirit of concession . . . which has never failed us in past perils, and which may be safely trusted for all the future."*

In a democracy, action must rest on agreement; and between men equally honest and equally intelligent, there is no basis for agreement save compromise. Lincoln speaks of compromise not to damn it but to praise it as a method, the method, of reaching agreement between equally patriotic men. And of the Southerners, Lincoln said: "They are just what we would be in their situation." This commitment to compromise means, however, that in a democratic culture—is it really different in any culture?—action lags behind thought in ideality.

### *III. Lincoln's Thought was Democratic*

So saying, we must now make explicit what is already implicit in the relation of action to thought. Thought is better—both freer and more ideal—than is action, and it must remain so. As touching thought, Lincoln said: "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel." As to action, however: "Yet I have never understood that the

Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling." It will be remembered in this connection that Lincoln did not justify his Proclamation of Emancipation upon moral grounds, but upon the grounds (and with the timing) of political expediency and military advantage. His principle in the matter is made clear by another declaration of his: "Wrong as we think slavery is, we can yet afford to let it alone where it is, because that much is due to the necessity arising from its actual presence in the nation."

There is a scrupulosity of thought, imperative upon an honest soul; but there is leeway of action; and the two are not one and the same. Some things right can be wrong to perpetrate, and some things wrong can be right to do. Each must be recognized in its own time and place and be properly adjudged.

Democracy requires complete freedom for private conscience, but for a price which is often overlooked; and the price is that public agreement must be publicly arrived at, not dictated by the private conscience in question. Privacy remains sacrosanct only so long as it does not pretend to be public. It is a fearful price to pay, but not too grievous. Common action must rest on common thought, and the only way to attain common thought is by the leeway of give-and-take. Consent comes only by concession. Whoever insists upon short-cutting this laborious discipline is not a democrat but a fanatic. Think what you will, and treasure it as you may, but *do* only what can be agreed upon (at the least by a majority). "I aver," says Lincoln, "that to this day I have done no official act in mere deference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery."

Lincoln is a perfect example of democracy because he illustrates in the crucial matter of slavery both the necessity of compromise

and the immunity of conscience from compromise. He illustrates, too, that when these two realms meet, heroism requires either total sacrifice of one party or partial sacrifice of both parties—or it implies a creative ambivalence which has not yet clearly emerged in our analysis. Lincoln appropriated this creative principle, and becomes our supreme symbol of democracy. I speak of something “creative” because we are not reduced to a rigid dualism, with thought forever on the one side, and action on the other. There is fraternization and so a certain resiliency. What is private today may become collective tomorrow, and vice versa. Lincoln was unique in finding a working monism permeating this metaphysical dualism. How he did this concludes our story.

#### *IV. The Surplusage of Value*

In every meeting of the public and the private there emerges what we may call a surplusage of value, something privately imagined yet collectively unrealizable in full. This is to say that sensitive men are urged by their better natures to demand more, not only of others but of themselves as well, than the situation allows. This is true if for no other reason than the simple one that different natures demand discrepant values in the name of common ideals.

When have all good men been agreed upon goodness, or just men on justice, or holy men on holiness? When others fall short of the demands made by this surplusage, the will to perfection easily turns one to fanaticism, and all is lost because too much is demanded. When one himself falls short before the surplusage of demand, a sense of guilt naturally supervenes. Either way (and it may go both ways at once), the principle of surplus value reduces the total

ideality of any conflict situation below the level of comfort—and perhaps of safety. The best becomes enemy of the better; and a value-minimum ensues partly because a value-maximum has been required. Conscience always leans toward despotism.

A good man, that is to say, can become a dependable democrat only when he learns to accept for public action less of ideality than his private insight demands. He must lower his sights for action in order to keep from having to lower his sights for thought. The surplusage of thought over action must be privately contained. This is the more intimate and the harder discipline which democracy requires.

Just before his assassination, Lincoln was charged in Congress with trying to pacify the South (the so-called Louisiana Reconstruction Plan) without having faced the question as to whether the Confederacy was in or outside the Union. Had the seceding states withdrawn or only tried to withdraw? It was a question on which honest men might differ, indeed had differed to the point of war. Men might differ on this and still unite on a common course of action.

To the charge in Congress Lincoln admitted that he had not raised the previous question as to the nature of the Union. He went further and declared he would not entertain that question. He went still further and explained why the question should not be put. Such a question, said he, is “practically immaterial.” Such a question, said he, is “a pernicious abstraction.” Such a question, he said, “could have no other effect than the mischievous one of dividing our friends.” Settle the practical question as to how neighbors could again be neighborly and then, he concluded, each might “forever after innocently indulge his own opinion”—as to speculation on the nature of the Union.

It was his clearing the road to action of

such sectarian roadblocks that made Lincoln the very voice of Western democracy. If men know that all ideals transcend action, they will not be so quick to persecute each other for divergence in ideals. Lincoln knew this. If men understand in advance that the price of common action is compromise for all concerned, they will not so adamantly stick up in conference for their own interpretation of the ideal. Lincoln knew this. If men understand that the options of action are more narrowed than the amplitude of thought, they will not insist that all of any ideal be embodied in its appropriate action.

Lincoln knew this. He knew that for many questions, and for all collective questions, it is more important to get them settled than to get them settled exactly "right."

Lincoln knew, finally, what ideals are *not* good for. And so he could use all ideals that are relevant for all the difference they can make—and could then contain the rest as objects of wonder and as manna for the soul. Only such insight can make common action possible through peaceful compromise and can leave private thought uncommon through individual celebration of its transcendent worth.

# Lincoln the Emancipator

BY KENNETH A. BERNARD

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN was born in a slave state, Kentucky, and while he could not in later years remember much concerning his boyhood there, he did state in an autobiographical sketch in 1860 that his father, a man of modest circumstances, had moved from Kentucky across the Ohio River into the free state of Indiana "partly on account of slavery."

As a youth in Indiana and a young man in Illinois, Lincoln had, however, not only read and heard about slavery, but had seen something of it. He had made two trips down the Mississippi River to New Orleans by flatboat, and had thus had opportunity to observe it where, public opinion maintained, it was at its worst.

When, as a member of the Legislature of the State of Illinois, Abraham Lincoln introduced a protest into that body that "slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy" he was making his first known public pronouncement on an age-old institution which had been brought from the Old World to the English colonies in America over two hundred years before.

Since that time slavery had become a part of the very fabric of American society; it was accepted in half the states and was recognized by the Constitution itself, and it was inextricably bound up with the race question inasmuch as the slaves were Negroes.

The immense complexity of the whole question was already becoming apparent to the twenty-eight-year-old legislator when he entered his protest in 1837, for his protest included not only a condemnation of slavery but also of abolitionist doctrines—abolitionist doctrines which ignored the complexities and were oblivious to the results of such a drastic step. Immediate emancipation tended, Lincoln maintained, to increase rather than lessen the evils of the institution.

But, withal, the slavery question was not primary in Lincoln's thoughts or actions until several years after this protest. As a lawyer, Lincoln was occasionally involved in legal cases concerning slaves. As a Congressman in the United States House of Representatives (1847-1849), he had voted "at least forty times" in favor of the principle of the non-extension of slavery into new territories; and on his visits to Kentucky and in his travels elsewhere he had additional opportunity to see slavery firsthand.

Although he did not actively oppose it, slavery bothered him whenever he came in contact with it, and the depth of his real concern is revealed in a letter written to a close friend in his own native state of Kentucky:

*"I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes, and unrewarded toils; but I bite my lip and keep quiet. In 1841 you and I had*

*together a tedious low-water trip on a Steam Boat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that . . . there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave border. It is . . . a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable."*

Actually, when this letter was written (August 24, 1855), Lincoln was no longer biting his lip and keeping quiet. He had been aroused and he had spoken. The thing that had aroused him and stirred him to speak was the enactment by the Congress of the United States of a law which turned out to be momentous for the country, for it aroused hundreds of others as it did Abraham Lincoln. This was the famous Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 which opened to slavery a large portion of the Louisiana Territory purchased from Napoleon in 1803.

On the evening of October 16, 1854, Lincoln spoke against the Kansas-Nebraska Act before a large audience in the town of Peoria, Illinois. The speech was a landmark in his whole career, and it revealed a new Lincoln. He spoke with great earnestness, for the first time facing directly and discussing more fully than he had ever done before, the question of slavery. No speech of Lincoln before this had shown such depth of thought, such vigor of expression, or seriousness of purpose.

From this time on until he became President of the United States in 1861, Abraham Lincoln spoke many times on the subject of slavery (in his famous contest with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 for a seat in the United States Senate he and Douglas spoke more than one hundred times). His position, which he emphasized again and again, was essentially this: Slavery was morally wrong and it was contrary to our highest ideals as expressed in the Declaration of Indepen-

dence. But slavery, already here when the Country was formed, was of necessity recognized in the Constitution. Slaveholders therefore had certain Constitutional rights to their property in slaves, and the Congress had no right to interfere with slavery in the States *where it already existed*. But Congress had the right and the duty to *prevent the spread of slavery into new territories*, and by not allowing it to spread but by confining it within limits, we could look forward to *its ultimate extinction*.

This was Lincoln's main point of emphasis—the prevention of the spread of an evil thing and its ultimate extinction.

But *how* was it to be extinguished? How was emancipation to be achieved? Lincoln was not, in these years, clear in his own mind about this. He thought that colonization in Liberia might be a solution theoretically, but unworkable practically; he thought that perhaps gradual emancipation might be the best solution, and yet he saw no hope that slave-holders would consider voluntarily giving up their slaves. "The problem is too mighty for me. May God, in his mercy, superintend the solution." So he wrote in 1855.

In all his thinking on the question, Lincoln was acutely aware of the many problems that would arise if the Negroes were emancipated suddenly and thrust into American society as free men, for he well knew that many people in the North as well as in the South were not ready to accept or practise racial equality. Lincoln himself, while he did not believe in complete racial equality as it is understood today, insisted that all men regardless of color should have equal opportunity. Equality of opportunity was the right of all men, he said, and should be denied to none. As he expressed it numerous times: ". . . in the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands

have earned, he [the Negro] is the equal of every other man, white or black." And he pointed the way by saying that ". . . in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can."

When Civil War engulfed the United States less than two months after Abraham Lincoln became President, the fundamental issue at stake was the preservation of the Union and the vindication of the principle of democratic self-government. It was a people's contest; if the Union was broken, this nation "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" would fail and democracy everywhere would be the loser. The paramount issue Lincoln thus made clear at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, in words that have since become immortal—this war was being fought that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

But the Civil War was also concerned with the question of slavery, for, after all, slavery was a fundamental cause of the dissension which had brought on the war. As the sentiment for emancipation increased in the North, President Lincoln gave it much thought, for he, too, wished all men to be free. It was on his mind day and night, and more so than any other problem, he said.

He hoped for a gradual form of emancipation—he recommended compensation by the Federal government for slaveholders in states that would adopt such a plan, he appealed to the leaders of the loyal slave states to act in this direction, and he urged an amendment to the Constitution providing for it. He even considered the possibility of colonization and took preliminary steps to have such a project investigated and to interest prominent Negro leaders in it.

There was, however, little favorable res-

ponse to these proposals; instead there was the continuing demand for direct and immediate action. In the early summer of 1862, the President decided to act—when the right time came. The right time came in September of that year, after the Southern army had been forced back into Virginia following a bloody battle at Antietam, in Maryland. On September 22, Lincoln issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which was followed by a final Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

This momentous step, affecting nearly four million Negroes held in bondage, Lincoln took by virtue of his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy. Only as a war measure, designed to weaken the enemy and aid the cause of the Union, would such a step be warranted, for the American Constitution gave the President *no authority* to act otherwise.

The Proclamation was in accord with his own sentiment, yet Lincoln, with his scrupulous regard for the propriety of his actions as President, wanted to make it clear that he had *no right* to make his personal feelings the basis of official action. He said (on April 4, 1864):

*"I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel. And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling."*

Although it did not free all slaves at once, for it applied only in areas still in rebellion, the Emancipation Proclamation was a high point of the Civil War. Lincoln considered it the central act of his administration and the great event of the nineteenth century. It became a landmark in human progress—it was the beginning of the end of slavery in the United States, it changed the whole nature of the war and made it, at least in

large part, a crusade for human freedom and as such gave hope and encouragement to those interested in freedom everywhere, and it made Abraham Lincoln the Great Emancipator. As a result of the Proclamation thousands of Negroes had become free men when the war was ended.

But the work of freedom was not completed by the Proclamation. The next logical step was to write this freedom into the Constitution where it would thus be recorded for all time. President Lincoln favored so amending the Constitution as "a fitting, and necessary conclusion to the final success of the Union cause," and in his Annual Message to Congress in December, 1864, he urged the passage of the necessary amendment. When in January, 1865, the amendment did receive the necessary votes in Congress, he considered it a great moral victory, but he urged that the work be con-

summated by the approval of the required three-fourths of the states.

Ratification of the amendment by the states began immediately, with the President's own state, Illinois, in the lead, a fact to which he alluded with some satisfaction.

December 18, 1865. The war had been over many months, but this was a day of special rejoicing for all those who had worked and fought for emancipation and freedom, for on that day the Thirteenth Amendment was officially proclaimed a part of the Constitution—"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime . . . shall exist within the United States. . . ."

Abraham Lincoln was not present when this event took place, for his life had been cut short by an assassin's bullet eight months before.



# Lincoln and Human Rights

BY HARVEY WISH

*The author, Professor of History, Western Reserve University in Cleveland, has published "Society and Thought in America" and "Contemporary America"*

**D**URING 1808-9 two pioneer families in backwoods Kentucky living about eighty miles apart celebrated the birth of boys destined to be linked in an ironically strange fate. The first child was Jefferson Davis whose family later settled in the rich Mississippi black belt, acquired vast plantations, and became wealthy slave-owners. Davis rose to become president of the Confederate States of America dedicated to Negro slavery. The other was Abraham Lincoln, son of a small farmer who chose to move out of the slave area into southern Indiana and Illinois. Young Lincoln's final destiny was the White House, leading the Union forces against the Confederate armies of Davis until all America was cleansed of slavery.

Lincoln, like the average Illinois farm worker, store clerk, and self-made lawyer of his day, probably never had more than ten months of formal schooling; yet he acquired a sensitive prose style that is notable in American literature and an even greater sensitivity to social ills and the universal struggle for human rights. He undoubtedly saw slavery when he took a flatboat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans and, even in his early years as an Illinois state legislator, he worked for its abolition, called for mass schooling as the bulwark of free institutions, and introduced laws to protect the small farmer from high interest rates.

At no time was Lincoln a radical given to violent methods. While he said that labor had superior rights over capital, he always added that capital also deserved protection. But capital must not *own* labor as under slavery. Besides, he believed firmly in the frontier ideal of equality of opportunity and in a fluid society. "There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us. Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account today and will hire others to labor for him tomorrow." Even in the twentieth century of large industry, this small enterprise ideal influenced Americans because society and opportunity continued to be fluid as in Lincoln's day. He was a younger contemporary of Karl Marx, but the notion of an implacable class struggle was wholly foreign to him as it was to his countrymen.

His early reputation was based on his simple dramatic skill as a trial lawyer gifted with the ability to reach the minds of ordinary men and sympathetic to the feelings of plain farm jurors. His frontier neighbors trusted him. When he spoke before a lecture audience occasionally, his message was for social justice. He denounced frontier mob incidents asserting that liberty must be "hewn from the solid quarry of pure reason" combining "general intelligence, sound morality, and a reverence for the Constitution and the laws." A law partner later

recalled his platform appeal: "Lincoln's gray eyes would flash fire when speaking against slavery or spoke volumes of hope and love when speaking of liberty, justice, and the progress of mankind."

When Britain and France abolished slavery in their colonies, this example influenced many antislavery men like Lincoln. Elected to Congress for the 1847-49 session, he joined his fellow-Whig Party members in combating the spread of slavery westward. He thought that the war with Mexico was merely a slaveowners' conspiracy to create more slave states out of the West. Therefore he voted against the war and voted, so he said later, about forty times for the Wilmot Proviso which forbade slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico.

Returning to Illinois, he reopened his law practice and joined the newly-organized Republican Party which had proclaimed Jefferson's doctrine of human equality. It is not the purpose here to relate the significant story of emancipation, but it should be noted that he refused to join the left-wing abolitionists who demanded immediate abolition regardless of violent consequences. Not an academic man, he was perplexed by the "scientific" anthropologists of his day who insisted that Negroes were innately inferior to whites. No one aroused him more than George Fitzhugh, an extremist Virginian lawyer who went far beyond slavery to attack modern liberty altogether, "Slavery, white or black, is right and necessary," Fitzhugh said and drew from the same racist doctrines of the French diplomat Comte Joseph Arthur de Gobineau which later served modern racists. Free competitive society, he argued, was a recent development that had already failed judging from the factory exploitation of labor in Western Europe and America and the appearance of socialism, another form of

coercion. Slavery and liberty, he said, "cannot long co-exist in the Great Republic of Christendom."

This basic attack on human rights aroused Lincoln to write his most famous political speech, the so-called "House-Divided" address delivered on June 16, 1858:

*"A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half-slave and half-free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction, or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South."*

Lincoln's House-Divided speech meant that he believed that in a democracy where public opinion was dominant, a single "central idea," as he put it, eventually won out in the competition of ideas. This central idea in our government had always been the *equality of men*. "And although it (public opinion) has always submitted patiently to whatever of inequality there seemed to be as a matter of actual necessity, its constant working has been a steady progress toward the practical equality of all men."

Thus he made clear his belief that the basic incompatibility of freedom and slavery in a land possessing a free public opinion was to be solved by the peaceful advance of free society. Unfortunately, the seceding South, ever fearful of race wars emerging from antislavery pressure, decided that the presidential election of Lincoln was an immediate threat to them and therefore they chose the path of civil war.

During those decades before the war, immigrants arrived in such numbers as to frighten those who feared domination by alien groups. One secret organization, the

American Party, worked to reduce the political power of newcomers by greatly extending the time of naturalization. Lincoln attacked those within his party who had joined this group and denounced discrimination against immigrants. As President, too, he appealed to Congress to liberalize its immigration policy. Bar only the enemies of the human race, he asked, and praised each national group for its special contributions.

In 1848, when revolutions swept Europe, he led political meetings to express sympathy for the liberal Forty Eighters. He secured resolutions praising the struggle for liberty of Louis Kossuth and the Hungarian patriots. When the entire world was shocked by the Russian Czarist troops which destroyed Hungarian freedom, Lincoln secured a vehement public protest condemning Russia's act and encouraging resistance. Lincoln felt the current public enthusiasm for Louis Kossuth and the Hungarian struggle at the time that this leader visited America and was hailed by huge demonstrations in the larger cities.

As President, Lincoln found himself face to face with the grim reality of war which he had always condemned as arousing the worst traits of mankind—deception, suspicion, and brutality. But he saw no alternative but resistance to the slave states and despite the nature of civil war, when the enemy is frequently within the gates, he managed to preserve a large measure of peacetime civil liberties.

He never felt hatred to the South—only against slavery itself. His law partner later said, "He was certainly a very poor hater. He never judged men by his like or dislike for them. . . . If a man had maligned him or been guilty of personal ill-treatment, and was the fittest man for the place, he would give him that place just as soon as he would

give it to a friend." In wartime, as so many stories show, he felt as much sympathy for the suffering Confederate boy as for his own Union wounded. Once, during his numerous visits to military hospitals, a dying Confederate soldier called for him, evidently thinking to get some diversion at the sight of the man whom Southerners regarded as the homeliest man in the world. Lincoln paused in his rounds, listened patiently to the boy, inquired after his parents, brothers, and sisters, and remained there until the boy died. The Confederate was obviously captivated by this humane man.

Lincoln suffered the necessity of sending armies forth to their ordeal, though this hatred of war did not prevent him from becoming a great war President leading his cause to victory. Many stories are told of his intervention to save prisoners from execution by military courts, of his heroic efforts to find time and patience to listen to innumerable mothers, wives, and others pleading for the lives of their dear ones. Once he told his former law partner, "Get out of the way, Swett; tomorrow is butcher day, and I must go through these papers and see if I cannot find some excuse to let these poor fellows off." Secretary of War Stanton was not always happy about the way that Lincoln used the pardoning power, but recent biographers feel that he used careful judgment, not mere sentimentality. But his personal suffering was immense.

Critics complained that the President was too generous in his policy of freeing prisoners willing to take an oath of loyalty (providing their cases showed that they could be trusted). He intervened to protect Negro Union troops whom their former masters refused to treat as prisoners of war when captured. "To sell or enslave any captured person on account of his color, and for no offense against the laws of war, is a relapse

into barbarism, and a crime against the civilization of the age," he said. The South yielded on this point.

Once the objectives of war were attained, he was ready to offer a magnanimous peace, permitting the Confederates to return at once to their homes, and discouraging most efforts to punish their leaders. "We would welcome Jefferson Davis' escape from the country," he told a friend. His kindness is memorably reflected in his speech:

*"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan—to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."*

In December, 1862, Lincoln issued the famous Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in all rebel areas and thus proved to world opinion that the North was fighting not only for the Union but for human freedom. Middle-class people and workmen felt enthusiastic and issued resolutions of solidarity. In England, overflowing crowds of workmen, many of them thrown out of work because the Civil War had cut off supplies for their factories, nevertheless praised Lincoln and the Union. Manchester workmen declared:

*"We honor your Free States, as a singularly happy abode for the working millions where industry is honored. . . . The erasure of that foul blot upon civilization and Christianity—chattel slavery—during your presidency will cause the name of Abraham Lincoln to be honored and revered by posterity. . . . Our interests moreover are identified with yours. We are truly one people, though locally separate."*

Lincoln replied understandingly:

*"I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the working men of Manchester and in all Europe are called to endure in this crisis. . . . Under the circumstances, I cannot but regard your decisive utterances upon the question as an*

*instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country."*

The import of the struggle for human freedom everywhere was as easily understood in Europe as in the United States.

This same world context for Lincoln's ideas is clear in the famous Gettysburg address. Lincoln said that "our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." He also said that the war tested "whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." He called upon his hearers who were mourning the dead that they must dedicate themselves to this unfinished task of freedom—"that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Here was a timeless message that could have been said in 1959 as well as in 1863.

While waging a war for freedom that cost 600,000 lives on both sides, Lincoln also advanced the interests of all classes at home. He urged successfully that Congress fulfill its promise to give "land to the landless." He said: "A homestead shall be granted to every poor man who needs and desires it and will cultivate it." Immigrants were welcomed, offered exemption from military service, though many gladly served in the war for freedom.

One singularly wise step was the appointment of the highly civilized Anson Burlingame as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to China, then in danger of disintegration. So successful was Burlingame in fulfilling the anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic policy of the Lincoln administration that the Chinese took the unusual step after Lincoln's death of making Burlingame their own envoy to the United States! Lincoln's championship of human rights had circled the globe!

# Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Letters

BY EARL SCHENCK MIERS

*The author has written six books on Lincoln and his times.  
His latest book is "The Great Rebellion," published in 1958*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN possessed a rare ability to express his ideas and ideals. In letters, speeches, memoranda scribbled on scraps of paper, state papers, a few sentimental poems and even a mystery story, Lincoln left a record of himself that, exceeding a million words, would be longer than the Bible, including the Apocrypha, and longer than the complete works of Shakespeare. The discovery of the literate Lincoln is fascinating because it reveals the living Lincoln—this remarkable man who, one hundred and fifty years after his birth, is still so deeply a part of the nation's conscience that he explains why Americans often think and feel and act the way they do.

The key to Lincoln's power, both as a statesman and a man of letters, stems from one source. He never stopped growing in mental or moral stature. From early maturity to death he clung to the same principles and much the same ideas, and in his writings those principles and ideas became living organisms, growing with the man and changing not in substance but in beauty of form. As a result, Lincoln emerged as a man of a fundamental creed that expressed the responsibilities, risks and rewards of the democratic way of life. In whatever he wrote or said, he was always unpretentiously himself—always the self-taught lawyer who examined every proposition first by syllogism, then by how it related to patterns of

human behaviour, and finally as a man of ethics making a choice between right and wrong.

What were the ideas and the ideals that Lincoln, as a man of letters, bequeathed to humanity as the tenets of a faith in democracy? They are five:

First, he believed in people as the greatest resource of a nation.

Second, he believed in the right of the poor man, through honest toil, to better his lot in life.

Third, he believed in education—that regardless of color of skin or present environment, all people possessed the capacity to live fuller, richer lives if their innate abilities were cultivated.

Fourth, he believed that reverence for the laws should become a "political religion."

Finally, he believed in the liberal tradition; he was always a spokesman for freedom of thought, speech, press, assembly and religion.

The essence of Lincoln, both as a man of action and as a man of letters, is in these five tenets of faith. He was, really, a man of simple definition in an age of troublesome dilemmas, a man who in a stinging letter could fire the headstrong general of an army for usurping civilian authority or who in quiet prose could risk his political future upon the proposition that "the people, under Providence, will set all right."

Lincoln's strength in statement and action was in his clear and moral understanding both of himself and of his age. He never claimed that his ideas were original, nor were they; and his genius rested in perceiving that though he lived in a troubled world his generation had not invented the devil. From the beginning of time, he said, the world had struggled between two principles. One is the common right of humanity. And the other? "No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle."

Against such tyranny, in any guise, Lincoln spoke and wrote with passion. No man ever toiled with greater diligence to express in terms that a child could understand the simple moral answer to seemingly unfathomable complexities. He breathed his own life, the beauty of his own character, the splendid vitality of his own good heart into ideas as old as civilization. What might have been stale platitudes on the lips of other men, on Lincoln's lips burst like a sun of understanding. He touched the hearts of all classes and all ages. He articulated what they also knew was the only way in which right triumphed over wrong.

As a man of letters, perhaps more unconsciously than otherwise, Lincoln was influenced by his own group of heroes. He would have been the last to deny that he was moved by the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, who believed that "the earth belongs always to the living generation" and who said: "Nothing is unchangeable but the inherent and inalienable rights of man." Lincoln was always a staunch political supporter of Henry Clay, whose speeches were read by Simón Bolívar to

armies fighting for freedom in South America.

Nor were Lincoln's literary models of lesser stature. Deeply versed in the fables of Aesop, Lincoln's own writings were filled with homely axioms. He advised a group of young lawyers: "Resolve to be honest at all events; and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer." As President, he told his secretary of war: "On principle I dislike an oath which requires a man to swear he has not done wrong. It rejects the Christian principle of forgiveness on terms of repentance. I think it enough if the man does no wrong hereafter." America a hundred years ago included a large and growing population of persons who had fled from Europe to build new lives under freedom, and they understood the Lincoln who said: "In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere."

In a letter to James H. Hackett, an eminent actor of the time, Lincoln revealed a modest, but warm acquaintance with the plays of Shakespeare. Among the plays that he had "gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader" were "Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet and especially Macbeth," and Lincoln added: "I think nothing equals Macbeth. It is wonderful."

Shakespeare had much to offer Lincoln—a sympathy with people of all ranks, a gift for language that communicated in homely, everyday, completely comprehensible images. Who could fail to understand a dramatist who spoke of the "cisterns" of our lust? Perhaps unconsciously, and yet unfailingly, Lincoln reduced his ideas to similar images. Thus for those who argued that labor and education are incompatible "a blind horse upon a treadmill, is a perfect illustration



of what a laborer should be—all the better for being blind, that he could not tread out of place, or kick understandingly.” Thus with the sick, stragglers, deserters and the discharged an army never equaled its enlisted strength because “it’s like trying to shovel fleas across a barnyard; you don’t get them all there.”

In knowing Lincoln as the man behind his words, one comes finally to the Holy Scriptures as the overpowering influence. He was a strangely mystical man, this Lincoln—who experienced the same dream before every climactic event of the war; who dreamed of himself as dead shortly before his assassination; and who, beholding a double image of himself in a mirror, accepted the explanation that he would live through one term as President but not the second. He could name the passages in both testaments of the Bible where dreams were prophetic. Of the Bible he said: “All things most desirable for man’s welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it.” Among Lincoln’s greatest pronouncements is his Second Inaugural, delivered after almost four years of civil war. It is difficult to find a speech by any modern statesman so intensely religious in feeling; here speaks the Lincoln who believed passionately “that there is a God and that He hates injustice and slavery.”

Lincoln, throughout his lifetime, was a prodigious letter writer. Angry letters—to his generals or members of his official family—he usually slept on, then neglected to send, but on those occasions when he did vent his spleen the recipient long remembered it. “I have just read your despatch about sore-tongued and fatigued horses,” he once wrote a commanding general. “Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the Battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?” He would never, even

in times of war, tolerate military interference with civil rights, telling another general: “. . . the U.S. government must not, as by this order, undertake to run the churches.”

All of Lincoln is in his letters—his flashes of temper, his firmness, and also his great patience and tact, his dogged honesty and his enduring sympathy for people. His gift as a man of letters rested in the fact that throughout his life he was consistently himself. A note to a station master said: “The lady bearer of this, says she has freight at the depot, which she cannot get without four dollars. If this be correct, let her have the freight, and I will pay you any amount not exceeding four dollars on presentation of this note.” Five days later Lincoln paid the sum. A note told the war department: “The lady—bearer of this—says she has two sons who want to work. Set them at it, if possible. Wanting to work is so rare a merit, that it should be encouraged.” A note told a legal client: “You must think I am a high-priced man. You are too liberal with your money. Fifteen dollars is enough for the job. I send you a receipt for fifteen dollars, and return to you a ten dollar bill.”

Is it stretching a point in evaluating Lincoln’s stature as a man of letters to include these everyday communications? Indeed, not! Other American statesmen, notably Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson, were scholars who wrote with a consciousness of literary style and method, whereas Lincoln, the master of them all, wrote with a consciousness of himself. He felt neither distinguished nor wise; without pose or pretension, he once informed a biographer: “It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of me or my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence, and that sentence you will find in Gray’s *Elegy*: ‘The short and simple annals of the poor.’ That’s my life, and that’s



all you or anyone else can make out of it.”

One hundred and fifty years after Lincoln’s birth, Americans have made out of the deeds and sayings of this man a national inspiration. They remember him as a man who appealed to “the better angels” of

their spirits; they remember a just, humble, merciful man who, dedicating a national cemetery, described the one reason justifying a war: “. . . that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

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